

I am ... Father God
Sermon for Sunday 6th September 2020
Cashmere Presbyterian Church
Rev Hamish Galloway
Text: John 8:48-58

Introduction

Father's Day! The image of God as Father is a strong and repetitive Biblical image. Jesus used it often to talk of God. He also refined it to the intimate reference to God not just as Father, but as Abba, daddy. How do you respond to this image of God as Father? We pray it every week in the Lord's Prayer – how does it work for you?

Because it doesn't work for everyone! Some years ago, when I was ministering in a very ethnically diverse congregation in London, I had a new person in the congregation who came to church seeking a relationship with God ... she was exploring faith. Her father was quite a strict and aloof Ethiopian Jew, her mother an exuberant Pentecostal Jamaican. She told me from the outset that God as heavenly father did not work for her. We were reading a book together as a congregation at this very time that I recommended to her, William Paul Young's *The Shack*. In this novel God is encountered as trinity; a middle eastern Jewish carpenter called Jesus, the Holy Spirit embodied in a whisby Asian woman who loves to garden, and God as a large black mother figure!

I gave my seeker friend the book. We met up a week later. She was radiant, telling me "God as a big black Mamma, that I can really identify with!"

Our images of God

C S Lewis once said, very perceptively:

"There are three images in my mind which I must continually forsake and replace with better ones: the false image of God, the false image of my neighbours, and the false image of myself"

This is so perceptive ... the great call of Jesus to love God and love our neighbour as our self is so constantly distorted by our dysfunctional images on all 3 fronts! We so often carry biases about the people around us that affect our ability to love them, we so often carry fragile images of ourselves that impact our ability to love ourselves *and* we certainly have huge difficulty in finding images for God that assist us in a loving relationship with God!

I think unhelpful images of God abound. For many, there is an image of an austere policeman-like figure who watches our every move with a view to judgment or punishment. This is God as the cosmic policeman in the sky! This is a scary image of God.

For others, the image is of a cosmic watchmaker, who sets things in motion and then steps back and lets things run their course. This is a remote and detached image of God.

For others, God can be seen as some kind of cosmic teddy bear, cuddly and undemanding of us; a comfort blanket image of God! The problem is at least two-fold here: where is the reciprocal relationship here? *and* how does this relate to God the all-powerful creator? As a minister friend of mine says, "it's God Almighty, not God all matey!"

Some see God as a cosmic vending machine in the sky! There to respond to our every wish and desire. I was having a conversation with a fellow golfer this week who lamented that his sister's praying was so selfishly focused, only about her own needs. What did I think of that, he asked? Well, I said, supplication (prayer for our own needs) has a place, but only in the context of a broader structure of prayer that starts with praise of

God, thanksgiving, confession, then intercession (prayer for others), finally followed by prayers for our own needs. But for some, prayers are only muttered at times of personal need!

So, what is a functional image of God, and how do we get there?

Firstly, a possible avenue is to explore all the attributes of God talked about in the bible. There is a huge list of attributes, ranging from the big concepts of all-powerful (omnipotent) to the intimate attributes of graciousness, mercy and unconditional love. When I was studying theology at Knox, we were asked to list all these attributes and then try to make sense of them in one summary sentence. I remember coming up with something like:

"God is a majestic, all-powerful creator who graciously longs for loving relationship with all creation."

I like that because it captures the need for awe and respect yet the invitation to loving relationship!

But the best way to understand God is through Jesus!

The gospel passage today is part of a larger passage, John chapters 7 & 8, that deal with the question of the identity of Jesus. John 8:58 is the climax of this discussion as Jesus claims the great title of God, name of God, that we read of last week. It is the name God gives to Moses at the burning bush, "I am who I am." In John 8:58 Jesus claims this for himself.

"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born I am."

One commentary puts it this way:

'In one breath Jesus asserts his eternal pre-existence at some time. Jesus, unlike all other mortals, never had a beginning. He was eternal, and he was God. This is evident in the words *I am*, for this statement refers to Exodus 3:6, in which God unveiled his identity as the "I AM THAT I AM"'

Here is the thing, the "I AM" God we encountered last week in the Exodus story is a little scary! When Moses encounters this God at the burning bush....

- God's presence is veiled by the flames
- Moses needs to cover his face so as not to be overwhelmed by the presence of God.

This is an abiding image of God in Exodus. There was the idea that to see God face to face was to die! There was some kind of idea that God gave off an 'energy' that was too much for humans to cope with. In the great old Cecil B DeMille move "The Ten Commandments", when Moses receives the commandments on Mount Sinai he comes so close to God his hair turns white! This is not biblical, however in the biblical text, when Moses comes off the mountain his skin is glowing as a result of a close encounter with God!

This idea follows through to Jesus' day when the very presence of God was deemed to be contained in the box they called the Ark of the Covenant that was kept in the veiled Holy of Holies, inaccessible to ordinary people, only accessible to the High Priest once a year!

It is incredibly relevant that when Jesus died on the cross this veil in the Holy of Holies was ripped asunder! This symbolizes the way Jesus rips asunder the veils that separate us from knowing God. Jesus shows us God in such a deep and personal way that we can understand. It is all over the gospel accounts:

- Jesus is God in human flesh! (John 1:14)
- When we see Jesus we see God (John 8:19)
- Jesus fills out the name of God "I am" with images like

Light	Life	Shepherd
Bread	Way	Resurrection
Vine	Trust gate	

- And in this lovely parent/child interaction between Jesus and his Father in Heaven, we see modelled the kind of intimacy we can have with God. I think this is the key idea here – the possibility of intimacy, rather than getting stuck on the father image if that is for us unhelpful.

Conclusion

I was once helping a person who was a devout Christian and a CEO of a big company. He was running into problems at work because of his harsh, demanding and judgmental attitudes. As we unpacked this and how his faith spoke into this situation, he made a very interesting comment: "I think I have a very Old Testament view of God." He was able to unpack that and move forward into the fuller picture of God that Jesus displays as the gracious God of loving relationship.

There is a theological theory called progressive revelation. I think it has some merit. The idea is that God has slowly revealed himself to us until he fully unveils his identity in Jesus, where we see God in human terms. The Exodus image of God is awesome. That is finished off with the loving life of Jesus.

The question for each of us is around the positive and negative images of God we carry around. And finding ways to debrief that. Things that might help in that debrief ...

- Journaling
- Small group discussions
- Spiritual direction conversations
- Prayer
- Counselling

Ultimately, it seems to me, the powerful and life-giving place to get to is one of healthy respect for our creator and intimate relationship with our Saviour.

There is a prayer exercise I like to practice that may help with this. It involved imagining you are out in nature, a beautiful cloudless day on a mountain track beside a stream, amongst the bush filled with bird song. Praise and awe come easily to your lips. Then coming towards you is Jesus himself! And together you make your way to place to sit, he asks you what is on your heart and it all pours out, wheat and chaff together; he keeps what is worth keeping and with a breath, a kindness blows the rest away!¹

¹ With thanks to George Elliot