

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: May 30, 2021 Year B Trinity Sunday

Text: Isaiah 6:1-8, Romans 8:12-17, and John 3:1-17

Title: God is Like. . .

Focus: Today's readings each have their own way of describing what God is like. Our language for God or our way of referring to God ought to reflect the variety of ways God is referred to in scripture.

What is God Like?

Last week, we heard excerpts from the faith statements of confirmation students. I prefaced their reflections by posing some questions that would prompt us to do our own best to describe God—to put into words what we believe about God:

For instance:

- What is God like and how do you know God?
- If that is how you view God, then how does that affect your view of yourself?
 - How is your identity or your self-identity different because of knowing God?

I am a part of a Facebook group for pastors and church leaders. Recently a pastor described the response of a church member to her when she had said something about what God is like.¹ This member was upset about hearing the pastor use feminine imagery to refer to God. Here's how the pastor describes it. . .

Posted May 19 by Sarah Bigwood:

- **Her image of or language for God:** "I had the opportunity to speak with a member of my congregation who was very upset by my use of the word "mother" to refer to God. . . Specifically, I had used the phrase "Mother and Father of us all" to close a prayer."
- **This (male) member's response:** [He said,] "In all his many years at this church, he had never heard anyone refer to God in the feminine [and that he] does not believe that scripture supports anything except masculine imagery for God."
- **Her additional reflection:** "I'm the first female head pastor in the church's 380-year history. ["Wow!" is what I say to that!] I trust my colleagues and I am highly skeptical of his claim that this is the first time anyone from this pulpit has referred to God using feminine imagery. However, it did cause me to reflect on just how important it is to frequently use a broad range of imagery (and pronouns). So, thank you siblings in Christ who do this on a regular basis. It does make a difference!"

¹ PCUSA Leaders Page

- Within 5 days since she posted, there were 83 comments, a huge number for this group. I'd say that high number of comments reflects the importance people place on how we think of God and speak of God. And, as I said, how we think of God deeply affects how we think of ourselves—our self-identity.

Today is “Trinity Sunday” and it is a fitting occasion on which to consider the ways in which God reveals God's self to humankind/to us as we acknowledge God to be revealed to us in the three persons of the Trinity.

Today's readings as designated by the Lectionary have their own way of responding to the question, “What is God like?” And collectively, they provide a differing picture or maybe you'd say a diverse picture of who God is.

From Isaiah: What is God like?

- God is “sitting on a throne, high and lofty.” (v. 6)
- Majestic and powerful—holy, set apart:
 - “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” (v. 3)
- In God's presence, Isaiah is aware of his sinfulness:
 - “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips. . .” (v. 5)
- And yet, through these winged creatures, God responds. The prophet is so aware of his sin or “unclean lips” that he thinks he cannot approach the holy God. And yet God responds to offer a form of healing or forgiveness through the coal touched to his lips.
 - The announcement is made, “your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out” (v. 7).
- That changes Isaiah—he is then able to respond to God's call and says, “Here am I; send me!” (v. 8).

So, what is God like, as described in this passage from Isaiah? High and lofty, holy, set apart. . . And yet approachable when Isaiah professes his sinfulness.

From Paul and Romans:

What is God like and who are we in light of who God is? There's an entirely different picture or image of God presented in the text from the Apostle Paul in Romans. Paul uses the metaphor of adoption to describe our relationship with God initiated by God through grace.

Hear how differently Paul describes God from what we read in Isaiah:

- First of all, the text is addressed to “brothers and sisters;” we're already told we belong in the family.
- Paul invites us to call God “Abba.” It's a warm, intimate family term like “Papa” or “Dada” or “Daddy.”

- It's like we're being invited to sit in daddy's or grandpa's lap and hear a story or have a hug and be told that we are loved.
 - We are "children," (vv. 16, 17), and not just children, but also "heirs," (v. 17), which means that we not only belong, but by grace we are heirs or we receive the gifts that God offers.

Think about that contrast between how God is described in the first reading from Isaiah compared to in the second reading from Romans.

- "High and lofty," majestic, and holy in the first reading
- Like a beloved parent, daddy, "Abba" in the second reading.

From the Gospel of John:

"What is God like?" Another way to ask that or discover that is, "How is God revealed?" or "How does God reveal God's self to us?"

- God is revealed or God reveals God's self in all kinds of ways, but God is revealed most fully in the person of Jesus.

In this passage from John, Jesus is the way that God reveals God's love for the world. God is love and God shows this love in Jesus.

What *is* God Like?

All language for God is a metaphor. Meaning that "God is *like* this" or "God is like this *in some way* and also *unlike* this in some way." The metaphor is useful or describes some aspect of God, but the fullness of God exceeds that metaphor or that description. God is not fully described by that metaphor.

We could deduce this even from the three brief readings this morning. God is described in different ways:

- "high and lofty" in Isaiah,
- Called "abba," *daddy* in the reading from Romans
- Is most fully revealed in the person of Jesus from the reading from John, who embodies the love of God.

None of these readings individually fully describes God, yet each includes or highlights an aspect of God or a true characteristic of God.

When scripture says, "God is my rock. . ." (Psalm 18 or 2 Samuel 22, for instance) we don't mean that God is actually a rock. We mean to say that God can be counted on or depended on during difficult times. It's a metaphor used to describe an aspect of God.

There are other images from nature used in Scripture to describe God. God is like:

- Fire (Exodus 2)

- well-spring, as in an abundant source of water (John 4)
- light (John 8:12)
- eagle (Deuteronomy 32:11-12)
- hen (Matthew 23:37)²
- lion (Hosea 13:7, for instance)
- wind (Acts 2:2)

Lutheran Statement on Language for God

There is a resource in the Lutheran Church that puts into words what I have been saying in my own way. The document asks, “**How is language used in worship?**”³

It acknowledges both the power and limitations of language:

- “Words have power. . . In the New Testament, God in Christ is called the Word: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’ (John 1:1).”
- “Christian liturgical assemblies are gatherings in and around the Word of God, Jesus the Christ. Because God in Christ is called the Word, the use of words (language) in Christian worship should be given careful attention.”

Here’s how it describes the limitations of language or the inability of human words to fully describe God:

- “Because language is created and used by humans, it reflects the imperfections and limitations of humanness. Therefore, no use of language can ever totally describe or represent God.”

Our language or words are limited in that we cannot fully describe God, and yet we still seek to describe God accurately and authentically.

So, how shall we refer to God?

A catechism asks,

Question 11. When the creed speaks of "God the Father," does it mean that God is male?

And responds,

No. Only creatures having bodies can be either male or female. But God has no body, since by nature God is Spirit. Holy Scripture reveals God as a living God beyond all sexual distinctions. Scripture uses diverse images for God, female as well as male. We read, for example, that God will no more forget us than a

² “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! (Mt. 23:37)

³ “How is Language Used in Worship?” Copyright © 2013 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. www.elca.org/worshipfaq.

woman can forget her nursing child (Is. 49:15). "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you,' says the Lord" (Is. 66:13).⁴

And a follow up question might be, "Well, then, why does this reading from Romans refer to God as "Abba,' or why do we pray "Our father" in the Lord's Prayer?

The intent is not to ascribe human male sexuality to God, but to use a warm, intimate family term to convey a loving and trusting relationship between parent and child.⁵

As we have already said, our words for God function as metaphors. God has traditionally been called "father" in worship reflective of the intimate relationship between God and the church.

And it's also true that "father" imagery may be a barrier for those who have experienced alienation in their relationship to a human father.

"So, what is God like?"

- God is "High and lofty," majestic and holy;
- God is like a rock on which we can depend;
- God is like fire or the sound of a rushing wind (Acts 2, from last week);
- God is like a mother hen caring for her chicks;
- God is like a caring daddy who listens really well.

No language can fully describe God. But let us strive to speak of the glory, goodness, and grace of the God who is revealed in the world around us, in Scripture, and above all, in Jesus Christ.

⁴ Presbyterian Study Catechism: Full Version with Biblical References Approved by the 210th General Assembly (1998) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Question 11.

⁵ See "How is Language Used in Worship?"