

Pentecost Proper 7, July 24, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland
WA Nigel Taber-Hamilton Job 38:1-11, Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32, 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, Mark
4:35-41

“Just who do you think God is?!! An old guy with long white hair and flowing white robes sitting on a huge throne? If you’ve ever watched the Late Show with Stephen Colbert (that probably excludes Bob and Shirley) you’d know he thinks that! But (no surprise) he’s not the first to think that! I’m rather fond of the image of God on the Sistene Chapel in the Vatican – that’s the one painted by Michael Angelo – it’s called the “Creation of Adam” and it shows God reaching out with the first finger of his right hand to touch the first finger of Adam’s left hand (does that mean Adam was left-handed? Enquiring minds want to know – especially left-handed enquiring minds!). Sure enough, as one writer describes it, “God is depicted as an elderly white-bearded man wrapped in a swirling [white] cloak.”

Is that really God? Who knows?!! The bible isn’t much help, actually, mostly because descriptions of God pretty much end up in metaphors – God is like THIS, or God is like THAT.

If, to answer that question of what God looks like, I wanted to hold fast to a literalist interpretation white bearded, white robed guy on a throne (thank you, Revelation!), then

“Houston, we have a problem!” As one Rabbi (Ben Sylva) has said:

"A literalist interpretation of Scripture tells us that God is a rock that sent a bird to cause a virgin to give birth to a loaf of bread. And this is supposed to be an improvement on obtaining a chiseled code of conduct from a flaming shrubbery in a cloud. If a literal understanding is all that is required for faith, then I'm a yellow ducky."

Today’s readings invite us to consider the question I opened with: “Just **who** do you think God is?”

Job’s been asking that question for most of the 37 previous chapters of his long torment. His life, you’ll recalled, has turned into one long storm – a “whirlwind” is the way he describes it. “What sort of God can be so unjust to me, a just man?” he wonders. God’s response – out of this storm that’s Job’s life – is a series of withering take-downs in the form of several rhetorical questions, each of which turns the question back on Job: “no,” God replies, “who do **you** think you are?”

This is a direct challenge to Job to be more self-reflective; to let go of his own expectations of how his life should turn out and especially who he thinks God is – or should be – in that life, and instead consider that life in light of the God to whom he’s clearly praying. God invites Job – and us – to **“wrestle with dazzling, provocative images that re-imagine God as [the architect and] engineer of the cosmos, [...the] midwife to [Creation].”** (Elaine James). No old white-bearded guy, distant and separate, but the One who is at the very center of all that is, birthing us along with the rest of creation.

The Book of Job represents a challenge to anyone who thinks they know all the answers about the nature and identity of God. Instead, we’re all challenged, through considering the creation, to remember what we’ve heard from tradition, and to be open to new ways of engaging our imagination when it comes to God.

This requires of us a trust that’s often difficult to come by; it’s never easy to go beyond what we have always assumed to be the way things are and enter that transcendent place of mystery that is God.

Ultimately, Job “gets” this, and – if you read ahead – Job finds he can let go of his resentments toward God and, accept this different vision of who God is. He’s able to remain faithful despite what’s happened to him (Job 40:3-5; 42:1-6). Job’s trust in God has been reborn; it’s no longer “White haired guy on a throne: you are being terribly unjust toward me,” rather its “My Creator and Midwife, you are awesome; I now see that you beyond my limited ability to contain; I let go; I am yours.”

Today’s psalm also deals in metaphor. Obviously it’s chosen because of today’s Gospel passage. Look at the sequence in the psalm: God is a good, a merciful savior who through this identity has gathered together a people who trust in God. They go out into the storms of life, still trusting in God, and that trust is rewarded; “[God] delivered them from their distress....quiet[ing] the storm[s] they were experiencing in their lives] (psalm 107: 28-29a) and bringing them to a safe harbor.

The place where people in this part of the Middle East – ancient Judah and Israel – experienced storms was on water – either the Lake of Galilee, or the eastern Mediterranean. But obviously not everyone fished or engaged in seafaring trade. The Psalmist is using those sorts of storms as a metaphor for the whole of life.....the whole of life. Don't you long for a safe harbor when you have experienced – or experience – the harsh arbitrariness – the personal, or emotional, or physical storms of life? What sort of God do you long for? Some distant old, white-bearded guy on a throne, or a spiritual – or sometimes literal – EMT (who cares if it's a man or a woman!) who's there for you in your moment of need?

Perhaps saying this is redundant, but in Mark's gospel, the story is – like the psalm – not literally about water. There's no magic here, because it's not about a human being with the miraculous ability to change the tide tables! Jesus' words hit the nail on the head; it's about fear and trust: “why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” Or, to put it more accurately, “whatever vision you have of God doesn't seem to be working for you!” Rather like Job, the disciples' expectation seems to have been transactional: **“I've been a good person, lived a good life; God owes me; this shouldn't be happening.”** Life – and faith – doesn't work like that. If that's your image of God, then Scripture says you're going to be disappointed, just like the disciples.

Another way of expressing Jesus' words to the disciples is this: “If that's your image of God then no wonder you're afraid!” We live in a culture where fear is like the flood-waters washing around south Texas right now. It becomes everything; all other things recede into the background. Fearful people can be paralyzed. Fearful people can be controlled. Fearful people can do things that in the clear, dry light of day, they would never do.

Jesus' response isn't to manipulate that fear, because Jesus isn't about controlling others but about freeing them. Our faith isn't about making us so fearful – of hell-fire and damnation or anything else – that we can be easily controlled. Our faith is about freeing us.

To their credit, the disciples get this, they understand that Jesus is different. It's the dawning of an understanding that doesn't come into its fullness until after his resurrection. But it's the beginning; you can see it as today's story comes to a close, when they start asking the right questions, beginning with “Who is this?” – and you can hear the silent second half of that, which says “because he sure as heck isn't who we thought he was!” And perhaps Mark's abiding hope in including this story is that maybe we will come to recognize that God is different than we thought, and be open to new visions of the divine.

The recognition that our limited, human abilities are insufficient fully to grasp the completeness of God's identity is the beginning of wisdom; at the least, it shows us the danger that if we're not open to the transcendent mystery that is God then we're more likely instead to grasp and hang on to something that's decidedly not who God is – to something that in Paul's words, is passing away. And that's really important, because this is where the rubber meets the road. Remember, at the very beginning of the human story in Genesis 1, we're told that we're created “in God's image.” That means that if all of today's readings invite us to be open to new ways of seeing and understanding God, then we're also being invited to be open to new ways of seeing and understanding who we are as creatures of the divine Creator, and how we relate to our God....and how we relate to one another as a consequence. That's one of the core pieces of work we're called to do during our lives as people of faith, to figure that out, and then to act on it, in accord with the vision of our faith; in the end, it will be to do as Paul commands: to open wide our hearts in love and compassion, one to another.