

'The Backside of God' Children's talk and reflection given at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 1 August 2021 by Rev Peg Pfab

Children's Time: from *What is God Like?* by Rachel Held Evans

What is God Like? That is a very big question that people from places all around the world have wondered about since the beginning of time.

Nobody has seen all of God because God is too big for any of us to fully see. But we **can** know what God is **like**.

God is like an eagle sharp eyes and swift with wings so wide we can play under their shadows.

God is like a river, constant and life giving.

God is like the stars forever present and bright even when they feel far away, you can look up and see them blinking at you.

God is like a fort, strong and secure; inside there are hidden places to hold you when you are scared and need a quiet place to rest....

God is like the wind, passionate and full of mystery both here and mysteriously over there....

God is like a Mother, strong and safe. You can crawl up into her lap and she will hold you until you fall asleep.

God is like a Father, gentle and safe. He will put you up on his shoulders and give you a bird's eye view of all of creation...

God is like a Rainbow, vivid and full of color...a dazzling reminder of promise and hope for all people after a storm...

What is God like? That is a very big question that people from places all around the world have wondered about since the beginning of time.

Keep searching; keep wondering...What makes you feel safe, brave, and loved ...that is what God is like

Readings: selections Exodus 33:12-23 and 1 John 4:11 & 12:16-21

Reflection: The Backside of God

There is a song "Counting Blue Cars" by a rock group called Dishwalla: with the following lyrics:

*Tell me all your thoughts on God?
'Cause I would really like to meet her.
And ask her why we're who we are.
Tell me all your thoughts on God?
'Cause I am on my way to see her.
So tell me am I very far?
Am I very far now..*

“Tell me all your thoughts about God, ‘cause I would really like to meet her.” So would Moses...probably so would many of us. Like Moses, we might like to see God face to face so that we could be certain of what/who God is....and then we might be certain of who we are and why; and maybe then we could feel secure.

In today’s readings Moses and the Israelites are still out in the desert..... You may remember the stories about the Israelites. Having been taken into bondage in Egypt, they were finally liberated and led by Moses across the Red Sea and into freedom. They were on their journey to the Promised Land...but it was a long, tedious and treacherous journey through the desert. They started complaining because they were hungry...then God sent quails and manna. After a while they complained about the same manna day after day...it was boring. In today’s reading, God tells Moses to get the people to move camp...to leave their camp and continue their journey to the Promised Land. Moses is very nervous about that. He knew that even though the people were whining and complaining about where they were, when he tells they need to move, they will be even more upset. Change has never been easy for humans.

Moses knows that the people are always just on the edge of bolting and mutiny. He feels insecure with his leadership; he’s afraid the Israelites will not follow him unless they have **proof** that God is going with them. Previously they have seen God in the form of a pillar of fire or a cloud that went before them...but that’s not as satisfying as a face and a name. And so Moses wants to see God’s face...and know the real name of God...not just “I am Who I am.” Or even worse, “I am.” (as in Exodus 3:14) That’s when God says, “Well, Moses...you stand right here on the rock and I’ll go past...but I’ll cover your face with my hand...and after I’ve passed then I’ll take my hand away...and you can see my back. But you may never see my face.”

So that’s the best Moses is going to get...but not so satisfying. We all would rather see someone’s face than their backside. But we, like Moses, only get to see the “backside” as it were; the shadow of God’s glory. We really only get to connect with God by metaphor, through creation, art, through love and relationships. We know more about what God is not than what God is.

There is a somewhat interesting book called, God is Not, a collection of essays edited by D. Brent Laytham ...though the titles of the chapters are actually more interesting than the essays themselves. One of the more provocative chapter titles, I think, is “God is not nice.” What the author is getting at in this essay is that God is not some easily purchased entity...you cannot order up a docile God on ebay that comes with a smiley face saying, “have a nice day.” Which is kind of, when all is said and done, what most of us really want, isn’t it? And what Moses wanted. We’d like to see some sign of God...to see God’s face and see some person-spirit that we could manipulate and control. So if we say the right prayers, belong to the right religious group and keep the commandments...or at least most of them...we could be sure that God would go with us on our journey. That God would keep away the bad things; the horrible accidents; the enemies; the terrorists; the awful diseases. We are pretty much like the Israelites; we want to be assured that we are special to God...unlike any other people on earth...that we somehow are elected to avoid all the disaster and evil that fall on others.

But even for Moses... God would not show the face. Only a glimpse of its back side. So we always know more about what God is NOT than what God is. And we all define God differently;

the best we have are metaphors, images, imaginings, experiences, dreams, words...all pretty insufficient. Different people use different words to describe God: God is Love, God is Life, a Spiritual Presence, Mystery, Energy, Beauty, Creativity, Experience of resurrection & salvation...all helpful and all finally insufficient.

We know some things about God by seeing the effects of creation. We see beauty; we see majesty; we see an amazing evolutionary process; we see astonishing diversity on the earth; an astounding hugeness in the universe. Our minds cannot comprehend all that we see or know. We see and experience love and kindness and mercy and generosity. And we say, "This is of God." This is a shadow of the face of the beauty and glory of the face of God.

But then, like Moses, we are left with also the backside of God...the side we don't like as much...that isn't as pretty. If we attribute to God all mercy and kindness and glory and beauty...then do we also attribute to God all evil and death and destruction? Of course, some philosophers have said that is the result of human freedom; that God has given us freedom, even though God knew we might use it destructively. But that's really not a very satisfying answer, is it? Because we want to argue...well, God could have then made us so that we would only make good choices. And...what of all the natural disasters that bring such suffering?

Will we ever get to see the face of God and not simply the back side? When we're looking at God from the perspective of grieving a loved one's death; from the perspective of horrible tragedies: earthquakes, flood, wildfires, the awfulness of COVID Then what? Who do we say accompanies us on our life journey then? How do we think about faith and prayer; about love and forgiveness when we are seeing mostly the backside of God?

Marcus Borg in his book, The God We Never Knew, talks about God as an **experience**, not simply a belief. So God is the experience of salvation. Borg says, "I am convinced that salvation in the biblical tradition has to do primarily with this life. This statement does not imply a denial of an afterlife... but it seems clear to me that salvation centrally concerns our life in this world." ..."Salvation comes from the same root word as "salve", a healing ointment. Salvation then has to do with healing the wounds of existence.'

What are some of the deepest wounds we experience? The pain of loss and grief, of course. It may be the grief of a death of someone we love deeply. It may be the loss of dreams...when we start to realize that life may not be all we had once dreamed. We grieve the loss of time, of possibilities; some grieve growing older... We grieve when our children are unhappy... We grieve for the world...when we see wars and violence and famines...

What is salvation then? Salvation can be a kind of coming to a new life when one has experienced the depths of grief and pain and suffering; eventually after deep pain there is a different and new life and a new meaning and purpose that begins to take form. Joy and meaning eventually arise; but it is a different life and a different purpose in life.

For a group or a nation, salvation may be coming to realize that we cannot "have it all" in terms of material goods and money anymore. The US will have to realize it cannot have unbridled capitalism **and** justice. New Zealand will have its own challenges. "Salvation" may require finding a new definition of happiness and purpose not based on materialism. The salve

of hope...of friendship and compassion... can be our salvation...if we are willing to make the journey to something new.

Borg goes on to say that “salvation” can also be freedom from bondage; it can be experiencing forgiveness, and experiencing oneself to be loved by God. Borg describes this as a transformation from a self-understanding as “rejected’, worthless, unloveable...to a self-understanding and internalization of these words in Isaiah, “You are precious in my sight and honored and I love you.” How many times do we all need to hear and internalize that concept; when we are struggling with addictions; with disappointment in ourselves; when we are fearful of the future, when we worry we will never be what/who we think we want to be...or should be...when we are lonely. The salve of the experience of God...of Life and Love tells us: “You are precious in my sight and honored and I love you.”

And then we can get up...as the Israelites did and get moving on the journey again. We may never see the face of God ...but we can see enough of the **effects** of God...we can experience enough of God’s shadow passing by, that we can live with joy and hope again. We can tell each other what we do know of God...not so much...but perhaps enough...to help us find hope along the journey.

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