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 Texts: Isaiah 25:1-10, Rev. 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

Use Your Imagination

We know the painting. Two outstretched arms reach toward each other, their index fingers almost touching. The figure on the right is floating horizontally, surrounded by naked cherubs, all enveloped in a fluttering red mantle. He has windblown white hair peppered with steel gray and a full beard to match. We see the profile of his distinguished face with its piercing gaze looking toward the naked man on the left. The painting is, of course, the Creation of Adam and there is no mistaking which figure is Adam and which is God.

From Michelangelo to the Far Side cartoonist Gary Larson, the image of God as an elderly white gentleman in the sky with a main of white hair and flowing beard is immediately recognizable. And I dare say, that's the picture of God most folks unconsciously carry around in their heads.

Though, not one third grader. The teacher asked her what she was painting.

“It's a picture of God,” she replied.

“But no one knows what God looks like!”

“Well, now they do.”

We can't see God, so all we have are images—pictures made with paint on canvas and pictures made with words. By word pictures, I mean metaphors. All language about God is, after all, metaphorical.¹ We say God is Lord or King, comparing God to a powerful man who rules. We say that God is Father, comparing God to a procreating and providing parent. We say that God is a Shepherd, comparing God to one who protects and nurtures those in his care. We speak of God, whom we can't see nor fully understand, by likening God to things we can see and understand.

The problem is, our catalogue of metaphors is pretty slim. I've just named probably the four most popular: lord, king, father, and shepherd. It's true that these images are comforting. Perhaps they are comforting because they are so familiar. It's true that these images are very apt. They convey important truths about the nature of God. All of them are used frequently in the Bible. But, if lord, king, father, and shepherd plus the grandfatherly image of Western art are the only images of God we employ, we are like the writer whose keyboard has but five or six letters of the alphabet.

Dare I say that even the most powerful metaphors become trite when they are all we hear? If we only address God as “Heavenly Father,” our prayer life can become flat, even boring. If our language in church always refers to God as Lord or King, we begin to get a certain kind of picture of God in our heads, to the exclusion of all other possible pictures.

Not only is our catalogue of metaphors for God slim and shopworn, it's—did you notice—very male.

What's at stake here are two important things.

The first is our understanding of God. Let me borrow the title of J. B. Phillips's 1955

book called *Your God Is Too Small*. Your God is too small if you only rely on just a couple of images of God. God is way bigger than our narrow pictures. If we want a better understanding of God, we need to listen to more than just familiar and comforting language about the Almighty. I recall the refreshing jolt I got when I first saw a bumper sticker in the Yale Divinity School parking lot, whose ending I'll paraphrase since we are in church. It said: "Get ready! The Lord is coming! And is She gonna be teed-off!"

Besides our understanding of God, what's at stake when we limit our picture of God is our understanding of humanity. We say that we are made in the image of God. If that image is only an old, Caucasian male on a throne, what might that say to the little African American boy or the middle-aged white woman? We realize that we are not to take the male language about God literally, but when it's all you hear, it's hard for it not to shape your understanding of which people are really the most important, which people are really most valued.

So, how do we get a bigger, richer, more comprehensive, more vibrant picture of God? It's simple: open your Bible and use your imagination. The two scripture passages you heard just now are rife with colorful metaphorical language about God. Metaphors open doors and invite us in to walk around and see new things. I count more than five vivid metaphors in the Isaiah passage and several more in the Revelation one. This is so exciting! (Can you tell I was an English major?) Buckle your seatbelts. We're going to take a quick spin through them all, beginning with Isaiah.

The passage from Isaiah comes from a section where the prophet is praising God for deliverance from oppression. It's part of an apocalyptic vision where God has destroyed the ruthless. The prophet praises God, saying, "*For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin.*" So, the first picture is of God we get here is a destructive force, in modern terms, maybe a bulldozer or wrecking crew, razing a city. The city is unnamed, perhaps Babylon, or more symbolically every city where galloping greed, arrogance, autonomous power, and exploitation hold sway at the expense of those on the margins. God comes along and smashes it all. I confess, that this picture of a demolishing God is bit unnerving to us who prefer a more nonviolent deity. But it conveys a sense of God's passion for destroying all which is evil, and unjust, and hurts the weak.

Next, Isaiah calls God a refuge to the poor and needy, a shelter from the rainstorm, and shade from the heat. I was grateful our children's two graduations recently were both indoors. Anna attended one for a friend down in Monroe which was on the football field. She was on the sunny side where at 9:30 a.m. it was already 90 degrees. God as cool shade in oppressive heat, God as dry shelter in a cold, pelting downpour, God as safe refuge from impending danger. These are metaphors for God who cares about the vulnerable, the defenseless, the poor and needy for whom God is their only resource.

Then the prophet paints a picture of a banquet held on a mountain. He says the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast with the best food and wine. While I suppose there might have been a few men in the kitchen in Isaiah's day, I bet most of the cooks were women. So, it's not unreasonable to picture a feminine hand preparing this spread. With Isaiah we can think of God as a dinner party hostess whose generosity and hospitality are unparalleled, a warm and welcoming presence who invites and delights in everyone, sparing no expense for their enjoyment.

Isaiah goes on to say that on this mountain God will destroy the thing that covers us all

like a pall: death. *“He will swallow up death forever.”* “Swallow up” is the same Hebrew word used in the book of Jonah of a great fish who swallowed up Jonah and in the book of Jeremiah of a monster who swallowed up its prey.ⁱⁱ So, the picture we get here is of God swallowing up death like a great sea monster gobbling up a smaller fish. God will attack this marauding beast death and take it in the jaws, crush it, chew it, eliminate it, and perhaps spit it out.ⁱⁱⁱ Paul picks up the image in his Easter lyric, *“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”*^{iv}

The last metaphor Isaiah dishes up for us in just eight verses is a favorite of mine. *“Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces.”* Here we get God the mother. She reaches down in a gesture of comfort familiar to children and mothers everywhere. I witnessed it this week when nearly four-year-old Caleb Knowles came running across Fellowship Hall during VBS Thursday to find his mother Alexa. He was crying and holding up his hurt finger for her to see. She scooped him in her arms, dried his tears, and kissed his tiny wound. God the mother is tender and reassuring. The image reappears in John’s eschatological vision in Revelation 21, *“[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.”*^v

So, use your imagination to picture God as bulldozer, God as shade, God as hostess, God as sea monster, God as mother. As if that’s not enough to get you out of your rut, let’s buzz through the verses we heard from Revelation. We all know that the book of Revelation is full of vivid even bizarre images and symbols. It’s apocalyptic writing which is sort of poetic narrative on steroids as John relates his vision of God’s ultimate fulfillment of God’s purpose. In the last chapter, the vision is over and the writer John concludes with an epilogue and benediction, some of it in dialogue with Jesus, who is, of course, the self-revelation of God.

Jesus says, *“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”* Metaphorically speaking, he is the letter A and the letter Z, the opening act and the closing act, the creation and the culmination. He encompasses the whole alphabet of life experience and the whole range of our reality. He is the eternal presence of God in time. It is a way of affirming that there is no time (past, present, or future) when God is not present and at work in human history and in our personal lives.

Jesus also says, *“I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”* This is a messianic declaration. The messiah, whose lineage is traced through David, is the anointed one sent by God to redeem God’s people. All is not lost. There is hope. Just as the morning star is the star which appears on the horizon signaling the dawn is about to break after a long, dark night, Jesus appears, signaling the inbreaking of God’s kingdom of light and hope. Remember how he said in the Gospel of John, *“I am the light of the world”*?

Next John writes, *“The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’”* The bride is the church metaphorically, so that makes Jesus the bridegroom. Can’t you picture an excited young man putting on his tux in anticipation of wedding the love of his life? It’s such a happy image of promise, intimacy, celebration, and love.

God revealed in Jesus as all-encompassing Alpha and Omega, as the bright morning star heralding hope, as a groom coming for his bride: there are so many imaginative ways of to think of God.

Well, I decided early on that my children wouldn’t grow up with only one picture of God. In our family we say--actually we often sing--our blessings holding hands around the supper table. There’s one to the tune of Frere Jacques, which is, you know is an echo song, where you

sing each line twice. But instead of singing “God our Father” twice, I changed it to “God our Father, God our Mother.” It took Jack about two years before I heard him sing “God our Mother,” and even now it feels a bit odd to me. But it makes me stop and think about the love I received from my own mother, and the love I have for my own children, and imagine a warm, maternal, divine embrace drawing me close.

God—our big, wonderful, playful, creative, imaginative God-- gave us imaginations. For Heaven’s sake, use them!

ⁱ “So how can we speak truly about God at all? The best theologians of the church have said that we can do so only when we remember that all our language about God is analogical or metaphorical language, language that expresses both the similarity and the dissimilarity between God and human beings.” Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine, Revised Edition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), p. 74.

ⁱⁱ Jonah 1:17 and Jeremiah 51:34

ⁱⁱⁱ Walter Bruggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998), p.199.

^{iv} I Corinthians 15:54

^v Revelation 21:4