

Awesome Glory and Enduring Compassion
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I'm going to begin this morning by showing you my work - letting you in on some of my process. The reason will become clear in a few minutes so please indulge me. I actually printed my sermon this morning, on actual paper. Maybe you've noticed that I have usually preached from my mini i-pad. I like it because I can edit legibly right up to the last moment, I can change the look of the text to fit the room ambience and . . . it looks cool. Well, it did when the mini was a new thing. It's one drawback is that the screen is smallish so you can't see much of the "page." True, I can only read one line at a time; but I take comfort in seeing what's coming next. I'm a very future oriented person and I don't care for surprises, so seeing the whole page is surprisingly reassuring.

In addition to being very much more focused on "what's next?" than on "what was that?" or "what is this?," my brain seems also to be designed to notice (and sometimes just plain make up) connections between things - if possible, between all things. To resort to cliché: I have a "big picture" brain. There are some things I can get interested in at a detailed level: the workings of music theory, or the machinations of a garage door opener; but in most areas of life - dates, landmarks, hair styles, finances, the exact names of things, . . . the exact names of people - about those kinds of details I can be stunningly unobservant. A general approximation seems plenty good enough to me. Fear not, btw, Doreen handles all the family finances.

So I have a big picture brain looking for connections and always looking forward in time - that requires a broad perspective: there's a lot of pulled focus on this camera lens - definitely more telescopic than microscopic. That might explain why the people of the preaching team - people I once considered friends - stuck me with the sermon on "God!" GOD! I mean, could you get bigger picture than that?! In truth, I was glad to get the assignment then. Now I tremble a bit.

I realize that all that focus on my own cerebral tendencies just now must have seemed a bit self-centred. But I intended it as a bit of an analogy for the "problem" we will probe this morning. You see, as I have been preparing this little lesson, I have been thinking about focus - about nearness and distance - about details and generalities. I have been thinking about our perspectives on God, and about God's perspectives on us. Are we "not far from the Kingdom of God" as he counts every hair on our head and notes every fallen sparrow; or is God the master of the universe who ridicules our poor understanding of our own world when we complain to him? From what distance does God watch us? From what distance do we watch God? What distance are we keeping from God?

Now let's all "show our work" here - or rather allow me to unwrap an aspect of it. All of us have had our minds shaped by our elders; but not just by our parents and grandparents, pastors and teachers, celebrities and friends, media conglomerates and fashion designers. But even before all of that, and in spite of our individual cerebral eccentricities, we have all here had our minds shaped around some common big ideas that are not always comfortably fitted one to the other.

To start with, we have been shaped around the idea that we have a good and loving God, especially evidenced in the person of Jesus. Now, our confession of faith treats Jesus as a separate article from God and we've divided that work among the members of the preaching team so I really can't say more about Jesus because Marilyn is going to make all things concerning Jesus clear to us next week. But let's safely say that we generally hear have been shaped by a long Christian tradition that our God is good and loving, caring for us even down to the individual. That as Christians we have been shaped by that big idea I think you might accept without further discussion.

So then, let's move on to another, possibly competing idea that we have been shaped by but perhaps less consciously. It is pretty safe to say that we everyone here is a child of the Enlightenment - a movement of thought in western European cultures that began some time in the mid-1600s and dominates our way of thinking (mostly) to this day. The enlightenment gave birth to ideas such as the modern scientific method wherein empirical evidence (things we can see, hear, touch, taste, and smell) are the only valid evidence of what is real and true. The enlightenment birthed modern constitutional democracy, wherein those who govern get that power only by permission of those being governed; and within that idea was imbedded perhaps the most radical one of all: the freedom and value of the individual person.

These ideas really reach further back from the 1600s another century to the Renaissance which was itself a re-nascence, a re-birth of the values of the ancient Greco-Roman world in which large numbers of citizens were literate, free men ruled their own societies, and the gods began to be relegated out to the heavens. During that golden age in Athens, Aristotle proposed the idea of a "first mover," in which God is the creator and initiator of a universe that, having been set in motion, runs its own course. This god does not jump in to make it rain, or not rain, or to "bless us abundantly," or to cure our cancers, or to make sure the Leafs beat Dallas (which almost anybody should be able to do).

This view of God is called deism. Craig Harper walked us through some of this two weeks ago in his wonderful lesson on secularism and Charles Taylor. These deists are the folks who gave us modern, constitutional democracies in the England, France, the United States, and beyond. Btw, please don't let it stand when a well meaning American friend says that their founding fathers were all evangelical Christians. Some of them were fairly devout Christians of various kinds, but most were deists, not committed to any particular religion or expression of the deity. Thomas Jefferson, who appealed to "nature's god" in his famous declaration of a new nation, wrote his own version of the gospels in which he removed all the miracles of

Jesus. And he was the first North American to own a copy of the Quran even though he had never met a muslim - he was simply curious about their religion.

So, deism: God is a distant watchmaker who wound up the universe and now that it is running, his work is done. While this doesn't sound much like the loving God you have been taught to believe in, and it doesn't really match the God image our anabaptist ancestors had, they were among the renaissance rebels who stood up against the power of the church and crown. If Luther officiated at the annulment of the fraudulent marriage of the crown to the state church, it was Marpeck, Grebel, and Simons who through the crown's clothes, game player, and sports trophies out on the front lawn and changed the locks. We mennonites are among those who started this rebellion of skepticism and individualism. If some of us are sitting here 400 years later wondering, "why are our kids such skeptics?" it may be because that's what we asked of them as anabaptist children of the enlightenment.

So is this deistic view of god, the god of the Enlightenment, an acceptable way for Christians to view God? What does our holy book tell us? Is God far above the heavens, or dwelling in our hearts? Well, we heard some of the voices from the bible read in concert by Brad and Doreen earlier. What did we hear?

We heard that God is far:

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:

"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

- Job

We heard God is near:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

- John

God is far:

"As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts."

- Isaiah

God is near:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ

- Ephesians

far:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; . . . - all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

- Colossians

near:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's notice. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

- Matthew

So we hear conflicting voices about God's nature: God is the great king above all kings and the great god above all gods; God is a still small voice whispering in a prophet's ear. God is the one whose glory Moses may not see lest he die; God is the stranger who eats a meal at Abraham's tent, who negotiates with Abraham over Sodom's fate.

In fact, there seems to be a pattern in the Jewish religion wherein God is gradually elevated from being merely one of many tribal deities (though the best one, of course), to the God who does not dwell in a house made by human hands (especially since it was destroyed) but takes up residency in the heavens as the only true god, creator of all. Israel's God grew from just plain old local god El (related to the Arabic, Al or Allah) to becoming a god too holy to know by name - or whose name is at least unpronounceable, unspeakable. As the world of the Jewish people expanded beyond Palestine, their God's realm expanded. But in becoming larger, their god may have telescoped back away from the individual needs of his people, focusing on the grander projects, manipulating empires to do his will.

The introduction of Jesus may be a rather dramatic shift in that direction, though the earliest biblical writer, Paul, introduces him not as a Jewish baby, but as a divine cosmic Lord. But that's for pastor Marilyn to work out in her sermon next week. Perhaps stopping short of the Jesus story leaves things unsatisfactorily at loose ends. And maybe that's fine for the moment. But come back next week.

The least we can say so far is that a close, personal relationship with our God does not appear to be the only pattern of people-God relationships in the bible. And indeed it may be the older model of relationship. Add to that our mental formation as children of the Enlightenment, with slight or significant deistic tendencies, and you have no trouble seeing why having or being able to describe a "relationship" with God might feel like an allusive task for so many. It shouldn't be hard to understand why models that only promote a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ as your Lord and saviour" might not fit for many of us enlightenment children; or for those of us looking for a God with global solutions in an era of potential global peril. At the same time, a god who put it all in motion 14 billion years ago and says, "It's your problem now, I'm out" hardly seems a compelling figure of personal devotion.

What level of personal attention might we expect, should we expect, dare we ask of God? Is it alright to pray for a better job, a good life mate, a sick friend, a country gone wrong, or a favourite hockey team to win? Is it good enough to pray just as a “spiritual exercise” to make us better people; or are we truly hoping that someone is listening to our prayers? Is God near and involved, or transcendent and holy?

Our own Confession of Faith from a Mennonite Perspective attempts to put some words to that question in article 1 on “God.” After doing the usual three in one stuff, and the standard Abraham to Jesus covenant maker section, our little confession says this (I am truncating):

“We humbly recognize that God far surpasses human comprehension and understanding . . .

God's awesome glory and enduring compassion are perfect in holy love.

God's knowledge of all things and care for creation are perfect in preserving love.

God's abounding grace and wrath against sinfulness are perfect in righteous love.

God's unlimited justice and continuing patience with humankind are perfect in suffering love.

God's infinite freedom and constant self-giving are perfect in faithful love.

Does this way of expressing these dual principles as united in God satisfy you? Do you need something more, something different? What is most important for you to believe about God? What do we believe about God? Let us ponder this much at least in preparation for our ongoing study of our true beliefs between now and Lent.