

Imago Dei
John 10:1-10
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“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

In the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship, there is a suggested prayer for after communion which includes the line, “let us remember Jesus as he was, rather than as we want him to be.” Now, I have always had issue with this line, because I like to think of Jesus as a devilishly handsome red-headed man. Maybe that’s just me? I used to think I was the only one, but this past week, I learned that I am not alone (as you will learn later in this sermon.) Of course, the intention of the prayer is to encourage those who have just participated in the holy sacrament of Communion to remember all of Jesus, even the elements of his life and ministry we do not necessarily immediately appreciate, hopefully reminding us that we are made in the image of God, and not in the image of our idyllic Christ.

Jesus, of course, would be familiar with this image of God insight. For the theological basis regarding humans being made in the image of God goes all the way back to the earliest chapters of Genesis. And whether that means humans share some element with God that other animals do not, whether the “image of God” statement is figurative language for God bestowing special honor unto humankind, the focus in today’s passage is not on us. Instead the focus is on Images people use for God. The images we use to help us describe the indescribable, to know the unknowable, to define the indefinable. Just as Jesus uses imagery to help demonstrate both who he is and who God is to the Pharisees; Biblical writers, and theologians throughout time have utilized images to point us toward Christ, toward the divine, toward God.

We don’t have to look too far in our sanctuary for imagery, do we? It has been a while, but I am sure you remember it. Every week, your preachers lead worship from this, the pulpit, a symbol indicating the Reformed principle of *sola scriptura*, and the importance of preaching and learning in the Reformed tradition. Now down on the floor, is our communion table, an image that calls to mind even on the Sundays we do not celebrate the Lord’s Supper, the ever flowing outpouring of the Spirit, the outpouring that we all experience, even as we worship from home. The font too is an image, one that reminds us both of our dying in Christ, and our resurrection into new life both in Christ, and together with the communion of saints. And of course, the cross at the center, unadorned for us Presbyterians, reminding us that the tomb is in fact empty, and that even amidst global pandemic, we are a resurrection people.

But while these are all foundational images, foundational elements of our faith, none of these images are images for God. So, to further our investigation regarding images of God, let us turn to our theologian du jour, Doctor Peter Enns. as I quote from our common reading *How the Bible Actually Works*:

“Biblical images of God are not there to test how clever we can be in making them all fit together nicely. They illustrate for us the need to accept the sacred responsibility of asking what God is like for us here and now. We can hardly turn a page of the Bible without seeing God imagined as a king, shepherd, rock, fortress, vine, or potter. God isn’t actually any of those things, but those ways of depicting God reflect the givens of an ancient culture that drew tribal boundaries, farmed, tended animals, and made their own pottery. Its like when 18th century philosophers and theologians referred to God as a “divine watchmaker.” Generations of smartphone and smart watch users will come up with their own analogy. At any rate, all of these images of God, reflect the cultural language used for God at the time.”

Culturally located in a certain time and place, or not, many of these images Enns mentions have had lasting resonance throughout the centuries and profoundly impact our spiritual lives today. How many of us have heard a prayer commence with the words, “Heavenly Father”? That’s an image for God. While indeed pointing us to a relationship that is both parental, indicated by father, and divine, indicated by heavenly, we all know that God is not just a heavenly father, for God is that . . . and more. God cannot be contained by location or gender, and certainly not by our language.

Peter Enns mentions the image of a Rock. Now a rock is used to describe many things throughout the Bible, God, Jesus, Peter, but we all know that God is more than just a rock. That rock image is pointing us to the strength, the steadfastness, the grounded-ness, of God.

A quick turn to our hymnal points us to even further images of God. The greatest hymns, carols, psalms, and anthems include lines and imagery such as A mighty fortress, the tie that binds, fount of every blessing, refuge and strength, hiding place, Spirit, Guide, Guardian, Sculptor of the Mountains, like a mother who has borne us,

In fact, if you have been listening to the music the children’s choirs have been singing throughout the year, you may have noticed God imagery in those pieces. Every single song they have sung in worship has included an image of God. We are the sheep and He is the Shepherd His banner over me is Love. Spirit of God, unseen as the wind, gentle as is the dove. Rock and Light and Wind, our God is solid, fair, and free. The Rock and Light and Wind show us how great our God can be. "Alleluia!" now we cry to our King immortal, who, triumphant, burst the bars of the tomb's dark portal. Images of God, sung by our children.

Now these images aren’t just stashed in the pages of scripture, or only sung within these walls. These images of God are carried with us in our daily lives, these images help form our faith. I asked on the Westminster family Facebook group what some of our members’ favorite images of God are and ended up receiving some lovely images. Fisherman, shepherd, Aslan the Lion of Narnia, said some. One long time member shared that they saw God in those with whom they struggle to tolerate or enjoy to be with. Many Biblical images were shared, Cords of kindness, the ties of love, a crown of beauty, bread, a still small voice. I must say that the image that made me laugh out loud was when a member shared that their childhood image of God was none other than Robert Redford—he of course being the devilishly handsome redhead I was referring to earlier. (Who did you think I was talking about?) What are your favorite images of God? Honestly, a pretty good follow up question is what are your least favorite images of God and why? That could be much more interesting of an activity, and could teach you a lot more about yourself and your faith.

But if Peter Enns is right, and each image for God is spawned from the culture of its time, I wonder what images we may be imagining for God, or perhaps reimagining for God now. Let me offer up two suggestions.

First, and this is one of my favorite Biblical images of God, the Mother Hen imagery that Jesus talks about in Matthew and Luke. Here's the passage from Luke:

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! ³⁵See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'

Think of all the attributes to a Mother Hen like God. Mother Hen God is caring, empathetic, strong, loving, aware of the pain that comes when loved ones deny her three times . . . or more. Leah D. Schade, the Assistant Professor of Preaching and Worship at Lexington Theological Seminary, is a fan of this image as well as she writes,

“The Mother Hen God is like the mother bird who fluttered over the nest egg of the world in Genesis. . . Like the dove that fluttered away from Noah's hand over the receding flood waters. . . Like the dove fluttering from heaven, hovering around Jesus as he emerged from the baptismal waters . . . This image points us to the God who welcomes all underwing, no matter how they behave, or how they look, or what annoying and inappropriate things they do. The God who opens hearts.”

This is one of my favorite images for God because Mother Hen God is the God who feels what I feel, who validates me, who assures me that when I have made mistakes, when I have wandered from the right path, and when I have been overwhelmed, those holy wings are still spread over me, protecting me, sheltering me, keeping me safe, loving me.

Now I loved this image well before we started living in a socially distanced world. I loved it, not just for all the reasons I just shared, but also because it was the image that resonates for me the way I most desperately strive to both pastor and parent. People have lovingly fluttered their wings over me and I want to do the same over my brood as well. Clearly, I am not unique in this, so many of us wrestle with the work/family/parent/child balance . . . but I can assure you that during the last seven weeks that reality has been “ever present.” You feel me.

Though I am blessed to have this additional time with my children, as so many of us know, that does not mean that the time is spent parenting our children in the fashion we would most desire. Whether it is distance learning, preschool digital hangouts, three zoom calls “at the same time,” this time of pandemic brings specific challenges for all demographics, but the strain has been well documented to intimately impact young families.

Now, I am not complaining, no, please do not hear agitation or bitterness in this preacher's voice today. I would actually say that some of the ministry I am the most proud of over my fifteen year career, some of the parenting I am most proud of over my 7 and a half year career, has occurred in the last seven weeks. But what I am lifting up is the gift of those holy fluttering wings that are spread over me, over us, protecting, loving, validating the courage, patience, and fortitude of us all.

The second God image I want us to contemplate comes from a wonderful womanist theologian from Texas named Melanie Harris, Associate Professor of Religion and Ethics at Texas Christian University. About seven years ago Dr. Harris started writing and speaking about the possibility of churches removing crosses from their sanctuaries and in their stead placing wireless routers. Her argument was that the cross is an antiquated image, one that sadly has many negative connotations associated with it, death, pain, colonialism, abuse of power. She

said that by removing it and then putting in its place an image that for so many draws people together, would be a powerful, prophetic, faithful thing to do.

Now, just to be abundantly clear, Dr. Harris was aware she was going to ruffle some of those loving “mother hens feathers” when she said these things; but I have to point out in the middle of a sermon on images of God, think about the connectational power that wireless router has done for this community over just the past two months. Eliminate that “remove the cross from the sanctuary” component and reflect on what we have been able to do, what we have been able to be, if we think of God through the image of a wireless router, a wifi connection. Think of the expanded ministry footprint of our beloved Westminster, and how new mission opportunities that weeks ago were not possible, suddenly now are.

If Peter Enns is right, and smart phone users will come up with their own analogy, their own images to try and describe God in a light that helps bring about some new understanding, why not an image of something that is necessary for us to worship together like this today? We all know how lame our cell phones are without either a wifi connection or a data plan. We are living in a new era and it may be time for a new God image to help us usher her in.

How have your images of God changed in the last two months? Is God still a gardener, a potter, a king, a bush that burns and yet isn't consumed? Is God still Robert Redford? Well here is some good news, God still can be. The best thing about Images of God is that they don't have to nullify any other. These images are the ultimate both/and theologies for the pluralistic, postmodern, pandemic reality in which we find ourselves. What if our God image is a nurse? A postal worker? An uber eats delivery driver? The neighbor who checks in on everyone on the block? Maybe these images don't work for you, but the way we see and understand and interact with God has been impacted by this pandemic; and as a church, the way we operate, and the way we live out our faith together, well, it can never be the same as it was on March 14, the day before our very first live stream.

Which brings us all back to today's scripture, today's image, God the shepherd, guiding us into new places, maintaining focus, steering us over and through and amidst the rocky terrain. Jesus reminds us in this passage that the image of Shepherd points us to a God who wants for all of us a life full of love, guidance, protection, and hope.

On March 1, just two Sundays before we were forced to close our doors and live out our communal life of faith in this new socially distanced, yet digitally and spiritually connected fashion, the Genesis choir of Westminster sang this song titled “Little Lamb, the Shepherd Loves You”. Allow me to close by sharing with you the words our children sang that morning. Listen for their voices. Listen to this imagery. Listen to this prophetic and timeless word.

Little Lamb, the Shepherd loves you
With a love that guides your way.
Little Lamb, the Shepherd loves you
Sure as sunlight rules the day.
The Shepherd guides your way.

Follow him through peaceful pastures,
Follow him when storms appear.
When you're lost his love will find you,
Bringing comfort, calming fears.

Little Lamb, the Shepherd loves you
You are precious in his sight.
Little Lamb, the Shepherd loves you
Sure as moonlight rules the night.
You are precious in his sight.

Sure as moonlight rules the night,
Sure as sunlight rules the daytime
Little lamb, the Shepherd loves you.
You are precious in his sight.

Amen.

We did not know then just what storms would appear, what fear this would bring, how lost we would all feel, but we certainly did know then, and we still know today, that we are precious in God's sight, and that the Shepherd would guide our way The Shepherd does and the Shepherd will. Amen.