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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, February 4, 2024  
Isaiah 40:21-31

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I came across an article in *Entertainment Weekly* recently.<sup>1</sup> It was a list of all the actors who have played God on the big screen. The list included Morgan Freeman, who portrayed God in the film *Bruce Almighty*. Now, if I were a casting director, I would probably choose Morgan Freeman too. That voice! But the full list contained a range of actors, from Rodney Dangerfield and Charlton Heston to Whoopi Goldberg and the singer, Alanis Morissette.

I'm not going to comment on the idea of an actor playing the First Person of the Trinity. This is not about whether or not I think it's okay for God to be portrayed on screen or voiced by a woman or anything like that. Directors have creative license to do as they please. What interested me about the article was the idea itself. How *do* we imagine God? When we think about or pray to God, do we have a picture of Him in our minds?

The directors who cast these various actors in the role of God are doing what we all do to some extent in our own heads – imagining what God is like.

I am not talking about what God looks like physically. I am talking about our impression of God – His personality, His priorities, His likes and dislikes. It is important to examine this image of God that we carry in our heads and ask where it comes from. What are its sources?

Throughout history, humans have imagined deities. They conceived of gods who derived their essence and their power from nature - from thunder, water, wind, sun, and so forth. They imagined gods and goddesses who were like human beings writ large, consumed with the same passions and motives that drive mortals, motives like love, anger, jealousy, and longing for power.

Sometimes humans created crude idols out of wood and stone and worshipped them. Some of the more sophisticated of our ancestors rejected polytheism and imagined that God was pure spirit, or rationality, or some other invisible force that gave shape to the universe.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ew.com/movies/actors-who-have-played-god>

But we are Christians, and we believe in the God Who revealed Himself to Abraham and Moses, Who created us to bear His image, and Who became incarnate in a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish man from Nazareth. Is it possible that we too might be carrying around the wrong idea of God in our minds? Is it possible that something is missing from our understanding of God, something that is vital to our life of faith and our ability to live to His glory?

That is precisely what concerns the prophet speaking in today's reading from Isaiah. That is my text for today, but before I get to it, I want to spend a little more time on the idea that we might have unwittingly picked up a distorted idea of God or *even* that we might have Him all wrong to begin with.

There are Christians for whom God the Father is a frightening, oppressive, judgmental figure. When they think of God, wrath is the first attribute that comes to their mind. When he was a young monk, Martin Luther was terrified of this image of God which he had contrived – the God Who was quick to condemn, the God who never let slide the tiniest sin or peccadillo. Luther found comfort in the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ; he immersed himself in the Scriptures until he was at last able to accept its multifaceted portrait of God as both holy and upright but also loving and merciful.

If you are a Christian who has absorbed a lopsided image of God as a God first and foremost of wrath, or if you know Christians like this, I urge you to turn to the Bible, including the Old Testament, and study all the places where our God reaches out with gentleness, love, and forgiveness. When you want to picture God in your mind, think of those great words in Hosea about how God cannot turn away from his love for his people:

<sup>8</sup>How can I give you up, O E'phraim!  
How can I hand you over, O Israel!  
How can I make you like Admah!  
How can I treat you like Zeboi'im!  
My heart recoils within me,  
my compassion grows warm and tender.  
<sup>9</sup>I will not execute my fierce anger,  
I will not again destroy E'phraim;  
for I am God and not man,  
the Holy One in your midst,  
and I will not come to destroy. (Hosea 11:8-9, RSV)

When you want to picture God in your mind, picture Jesus on the cross, murmuring "Father, forgive them." Think of Jesus restoring Peter and having

compassion on the fallen woman who wet His feet with her tears. Recall what St. John the Evangelist declared, "God is love."

But in our culture today, the image of a wrathful, vengeful God is in the minority. In 2005, two sociologists studying American religious opinions coined a new phrase that caught on like wildfire in academic circles. In their interviews with young people, Christian Smith and Melissa Lundquist Denton identified the following common spiritual beliefs.<sup>2</sup> There is a God who watches over the earth. He wants people to be nice to one another. The goal of life is to be happy and self-fulfilled. God does not really need to be involved in your life unless you have a problem you need Him to fix. People who are basically good will go to heaven when they die.

The researchers concluded, and many, many scholars have since concurred, that this sums up the basic religious convictions of most of the population. They dubbed it *moralistic therapeutic deism*.

It's moralistic because it boils down to being a good person, which means being nice and tolerant and doing no harm. It's therapeutic because the ultimate goal of this belief system is to feel good about oneself. And it's deism because the God involved here is mostly remote and uninvolved in human affairs, although He is available as a source of inspiration and a shoulder to cry on when necessary.

In my experience, this is a pretty accurate picture of the religious worldview of a lot of people. And it is unfortunate, but not surprising, that this insipid portrait of God has even trickled into Christian circles. We may read the Bible, study the catechism, and go to church regularly, but we are products of our culture as much as anybody else. So maybe we have also absorbed a little bit of this moralistic therapeutic deism. Maybe we too have fallen, unwittingly, into the trap of *underestimating* God.

The people being addressed in our first lesson from Isaiah are in the same boat.

The situation in the 40<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah is this; the prophet is speaking to the Israelites in exile in Babylon. Jerusalem has fallen, the temple is destroyed; this is the judgment for the people's sins that Isaiah has been warning about for thirty-nine chapters, and now the day has come, and the people are scattered. Some enslaved, some displaced, all exiled from their home.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moralistic\\_therapeutic\\_deism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moralistic_therapeutic_deism)

The first half of chapter 40 contains some of the most beautiful lines in the Old Testament, lines which may be especially familiar because they are immortalized in Handel's *Messiah*.

"Comfort, comfort my people."

"A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord."

"And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together."

"He tends His flock like a shepherd; He gathers the lambs in His arms."

The prophet wants the people to know that God cares for them. He has not forgotten them or abandoned them, even in the midst of catastrophe.

But the people are weary with waiting. They are discouraged. They are spiritually burned out.

They cannot imagine a brighter future. They are struggling to remember the promises of God. They are having trouble holding onto the idea of Him that they learned in the days before the exile. And this is not surprising, because they have been in captivity in a foreign land living with people who worship other deities, and some of that religion and that culture has probably rubbed off on them.

And now, it seems, they find themselves unable to put their trust in God. They do not seem to think that anything will change. Maybe this idea that nothing will change is causing them to despair, or maybe it has made them indifferent, so that they no longer put much stock in the prophet's words or his calls to turn to the LORD .

I urge you to go back and read all of chapter 40 when you can. Take note of all the imagery that the prophet uses to describe the LORD's might.

But let us now turn to the section of the chapter that is today's reading, starting in verse twenty-one. The prophet has had it with the people's limited, small-minded, shrunken view of God. He wonders where they ever even got such an idea of God.

Do you not know?  
Have you not heard?  
Has it not been told you from the beginning?

The prophet turns from words of comfort to a series of pointed, fiery questions. This God whom the people have lost hope in is the same God Who sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, Who brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing, Who commands the starry host and calls forth each of them by name.

This is a God Who is greater and more mysterious than the people understand. There is nothing and no one to which He can be compared. If you think you know Him, if you think you have Him figured out, think again.

God is the Creator. That is the most important theological point being made in this passage. Creatures must not be deluded into thinking they understand their Creator, that He cannot surprise them, that He cannot change them or reverse the course of their lives. And we must not think like that either.

Do you not know?  
Have you not heard?  
The LORD is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He will not grow tired or weary,  
and His understanding no one can fathom.

If we want a fancy word to capture the prophet's main idea here, God is *transcendent*. That means He is completely other from His creation. He is outside the systems of time and space, which He designed. He is not limited by them, but He oversees them, even to the point of emptying Himself and being born a human child to dwell among us.

There is a reason that the Doctrine of Creation is the foundation of our faith. We see it here in Isaiah. Only the God Who created the world can transform the world. The Israelites in exile share something in common with the people today whose idea of God is shaped by moralistic therapeutic deism or any worldview which minimizes or underestimates God. They have given up on thinking that God cares what they do or that He has real power to direct their lives. And they believe this to their peril, as do we, if we too have fallen into the trap of diminishing God or believing that He has few demands or expectations to make of us or little interest in having a deep, personal relationship with us.

We come at last to the glorious final lines of the chapter.

<sup>29</sup>He gives strength to the weary  
and increases the power of the weak.

<sup>30</sup>Even youths grow tired and weary,  
and young men stumble and fall;

<sup>31</sup>but those who hope in the LORD  
will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not be faint.

What does the Creator of the cosmos do with His immense power? He uses it to strengthen weary, stumbling mortals. The prophet, after painting a portrait of God as mysterious, transcendent, and mighty, now reiterates that this God is *for us*. If you have grown too comfortable and complacent, if you have come to think of God as remote, indifferent, or uninvolved, then the words of Isaiah ought to jolt you awake. But if you are weary with waiting, feeling dispirited or even abandoned by God, then these words of Isaiah ought to make you feel as though you can soar like an eagle. God has not forgotten you, He has not abandoned you, and He bids you come to Him and be renewed.

I return now to my original question. Where are we getting our ideas about what God is like? All of us have an image of God that comes to us when we think about Him; even atheists have an image of the God they do *not* believe in. So what are the sources for the portrait we paint in our spiritual minds? (And much as I love him, hopefully it's not Morgan Freeman.)

Because the truth is, all of us are tempted to idolatry. Practicing idolatry means putting other things before God and giving *them* our love and allegiance. Things like money, power, knowledge, or things like statues of a calf fashioned out of melted gold. An idol is anything that replaces the worship of the One True God.

But there is another, subtler form of idolatry. To fashion a molten god is an obvious form of idolatry, but what about fashioning an image of the God of Heaven that suits our own tastes, that reflects our own biases, that mirrors back to us a little of our own selves? This is an easy trap to fall into. The Israelites fell into it many times when they assumed they knew better what God was all about. We fall into any time we underestimate God, diminish Him, deny His transcendence and complexity and assume that He looks a little bit like us, that He wants what we want and hates what we hate and feels what we feel.

There is a remedy to this form of idolatry. It is to be steeped in the Scriptures. We have to be challenged by the entire Biblical witness; the God of the Bible is mighty, complex, and strange. He is wrathful, but He is loving. He demands holiness, but then He covers us in the garment of His own righteousness. He is the Creator God of Genesis. He is the God Who called one people to be His chosen race and then used that race of people to reach the whole world. He is the God Who gave us the Law, and He is the God Who frees us from self-justification by that Law. He is the warrior God of Joshua. He is the Prince of Peace. He is the Man hanging on the cross in the Gospels. He is the Man Who was resurrected from death to abolish death's curse for all time.

Let the whole tapestry of Scripture inform your idea of God. Every book, every chapter, every verse; all come together to give us an idea of the almighty God who is *for us*. The whole witness of Scripture helps us to better understand the God Who came to us as the Man Jesus and gave His life for us that we might soar on eagles' wings.

To Him be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.