

“Children Bound for Home” GPPC 5-27-18
Isaiah 6:1-8, Romans 8:12-17

If somebody said, “Draw me a picture of God” what would you draw? An old man with a beard? A woman without a beard? God with white skin or God with brown skin? What’s your image of God?

Of course there are multiple images of God in the Bible, because God is too great to be captured by any one image that we finite human beings might have. The biblical images tend to provide balance to each other. And we Christians affirm that God’s revelation in Jesus preempts all of the other images of God in the Bible. It’s not that the other biblical images of God don’t matter. They do. But God’s revelation in Jesus is definitive.

Isaiah 6:1-8 is one of the pivotal passages in all of scripture. The prophet Isaiah receives his calling by God via a trip to heaven, the heavenly throne room to be more exact.

Isaiah begins by saying his visit happened, “In the year that King Uzziah died...” “In the year that King Uzziah died” reminds us that Uzziah, like all rulers and all powerful people, passed through this

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world. He had his time, like all of us, which he used for good or evil or some of both. But Uzziah, in fact, was not and is not the true king, the everlasting Sovereign of the Universe. That title and honor belong solely to the One Isaiah goes to see—God.

Isaiah sees the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and so enormous that the hem of his robe fills the temple. Seraphs, these six-winged biblical creatures are in attendance above him. With two wings they fly, with two they cover their faces, and with two they cover their feet, a euphemism of genitals. Why? Because God is holy and terrifying and nobody can gaze upon the face of God and live. So the seraphs call back and forth blasting a stereo “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God’s glory.” And the seraphs are so loud that the temple shakes and the place fills with smoke.

Adoration. This God is awesome. (An over-used word in our day, but awesome is the right word here). God is awesome, not merely humanity multiplied a bit. God is holy, set apart, different, and beyond us. Worthy of adoration.

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And Isaiah *gets* it. This is not a user-friendly god. This is not our divine buddy. This is the Lord, maker of heaven and earth, the power beyond all powers and knowledge beyond all knowledge. God is not to be trifled with, neither to be ignored. And Isaiah understands what a precarious place he is in. “Woe is me!” he says. “I’m a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.”

This is confession. After he comes into God’s presence, Isaiah becomes aware of his own failings, his sins. And he knows he cannot lie his way out of this encounter with God. No amount of bluster or distraction will work. Every single human being, no matter how powerful, no matter how slick and arrogant, no matter how devious--we will all stand before God. Isaiah stands before God and confesses.

But then comes the assurance of pardon. One of the seraphs takes a live coal from the altar, touches it to Isaiah’s lips, and says, “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Isaiah’s pardon is assured, but it’s been a painful pardon, a costly one, a purifying one. And the imagery is troubling, isn’t it?

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Then finally comes the response. God says, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us [us being a reference to the heavenly court]?”

And Isaiah says, “Here am I; send me!”

Sunday after Sunday this is the pattern for our worship. We come into God’s presence with adoration. Then we become aware of our sins. Then we confess our sins. Then we are assured of God’s pardon. Then we hear God’s word and God’s call to service, and then we respond with our lives. Sunday after Sunday. Notice there’s nothing about “Did I *get* something out of worship this morning?” And there’s no mention of “Was worship fun today?” Worship is not self-fulfillment and worship is not entertainment. It’s the privilege of returning to God what is owed to God—our adoration and thanksgiving, our lives.

One professor described worship as “purposeless praise.” Worship is not a utilitarian act. Worship is “purposeless praise” of God who is awesome, holy, scary, yet merciful, and commanding.

This is an image of God, an important image of God.

Speaking to the Roman church and us, Paul provides a balance to this image. Though the Trinity is never explained in the Bible, in just six

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verses, Paul speaks of all three persons (or faces) of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And when we say that God is Trinity, we are saying that love is not something outside God; love is the very *being* of God. Within God’s very self there is the reciprocity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is giving and receiving in love within God’s being, because God *is* love. And this leads us to decision.

Paul says we have a choice. First option--we can “live according to the flesh” and be “debtors to the flesh.” And when we hear this language about “flesh” it probably makes us think that Paul is talking about irresponsible sexual behavior, sexual sins. But Paul’s meaning is actually more expansive than that. Basically to live according to the flesh means to live selfishly. So living according to the flesh includes egotism, laziness, greed, worrying too much about ourselves, not caring much about others, gossiping, destructive sexual behavior, and other sins that elevate us by disregarding others.

Paul is not saying that our bodies are bad or that physical pleasures are bad. He is saying we live “according to the flesh” when we make ourselves the center of the universe. This kind of living is deadly. And

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this idolatry of self enslaves us (as all idolatry does) and creates fear in us. As Paul says a “spirit of slavery” will cause us to “fall back into fear.”

But Paul says something amazing, something miraculous has happened to us. We’ve been adopted.

A few years ago, my wife Beth had been longing for a cat to replace our old cat we’d finally had to have put to sleep a couple months earlier. Practically every day Beth had begun looking at cats online available at the county animal shelter. You may recall that the shelter itself had been going through a difficult time with allegations of animal mistreatment and the firing of staff. So Beth and I especially wanted to be supportive of the shelter at that time. We went out on a Sunday afternoon, and discovered that a lot of other people had had the same idea and that was encouraging.

The place looked okay, not great, but okay. Cats were kept in compartments with Plexiglas windows, two cats to a compartment. We asked volunteers to let us see and hold the friendliest cats they had. And

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we looked at several before deciding on a tortoise-shell colored cat, whose name we changed to Shelly.

It was time to pay. I carried Shelly up to the front desk and placed her in a box the shelter provided. She jumped out and ran away. We managed to catch her and I put her in the box again. And she jumped out and ran away again. Another person who was there to adopt an animal asked if she could help. And we agreed. She got Shelly into the box and managed to get it closed before she could jump out again.

We took Shelly home, meowing all the way, of course. And when we got home, she walked around like she owned the place—cat royalty. But over time she has changed. She rubs against us. Purrs. Plays. Cries when we leave. And rejoices when we return. She's been adopted into the family and she has grown into the family.

Paul says we've been adopted by God. So we're children of God, not slaves of the flesh. Like Shelly, we're tempted to return to a sphere of existence that's confining and more like slavery. But we're children of God, growing into our adoption, led by the Spirit to a new way of life. And we don't need to "fall back into fear." Instead, we cry out to God,

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“Abba! Father!” And we trust in God not as an imperfect human father but as a perfect divine father, as a perfect divine parent who has expectations for us but who also loves us unconditionally. God loves us as we are, but God will not leave us as we are. God is always working in us to help us grow as followers of Christ.

Because we’ve been adopted as children of God, our lives are transformed. We don’t need to live in fear but in gratitude. We don’t have to be so self-centered, because we know we’re children of God who are meant not to be selfish and self-centered but to be God-centered and other-centered in love.

Of course, it’s not easy. That’s why Paul mentions that we’re “joint heirs with Christ, if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.” Following Christ requires effort and even some suffering. But that’s part of living out our true nature.

How might God be calling you and me to be less self-centered and more God-centered and other-centered? What bad habits are tricking us into returning to the slavery of living in the self-centered flesh, instead of living into the joy of being children of God?

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There are many different images of God in the Bible, but Paul's image here is God as Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is love within the being of God and love poured into our hearts as children of God who will one day be glorified with Christ.

David Power was a Christian theologian and professor who died at age 81. Even though he was a theology professor, he always struggled with the fact that he really wasn't clear about what the afterlife would be like. He knew that life belonged to God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yet during the final two years of his life battling cancer, Power continued to struggle with the question of the afterlife.

Near the end, he told a former student of an encounter he'd had with a nurse one day. He'd met her when he began his first chemotherapy session two years earlier, and then he'd seen her the day before his final surgery. And she had said to him, "Remember me when you come into the light."

Power asked his former student, "What do you think about that?"

The student answered, "Well, it is you who will be there, wherever or whatever awaits on the other side of death."

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Powell answered, “That’s saying too much...The light. Maybe that’s it.”

And the student said, “And the bond between the living and the dead.”

“Yes, there is that,” he answered. And then at last he said, “Trust.”

(Michael Downey in *Weavings*, Vol. XXX, Number 2, 37-38.)

God is awesome and holy, but finally God is Trinity, love within the being of God, love poured into you and me as children of God, who are bound not by slavery, not to fall into fear but to live in hope of glory in the light, bound for home. Bound for home. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal