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Questions Every Christian Asks 2. Who Is God?

Psalm 36:6-8 NRSV Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O Lord. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

1 John 4:11-12, 16 NRSV Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

There is a certain presumptuousness, I realize, in purporting to preach a 15-minute sermon on the topic of “Who is God?” After all, in each of your pews is an entire book that seeks to answer that question! If you Google the phrase “Who is God?” you get 471 million results. If you simply Google the word “God,” you get 1.7 billion results. Christian artists in every age have sought to give pictorial or cinematic expression to that question, and the results can range from amusing to startling to cliched. If you are fan of Monty Python, you may remember the snippy and grouchy God depicted in “The Search for the Holy Grail.” [\[PLAY\]](#) A now-classic portrayal of God, if somewhat cliched, can be found in Charlton Heston’s voiceover in “The Ten Commandments.” [\[PLAY\]](#) You may not believe it now, but George Burns’ portrayal of an irascible God who has selected John Denver as his messenger provoked protests for its alleged blasphemy when the film “Oh God!” was released. [\[PLAY\]](#) And folks who are so inclined not to want to see God as anything other than an ultra-dignified and super-serious white male definitely did not care for the two portrayals of God in the movies that are among my favorites. I love the twinkle and compassion in Whoopi Goldberg’s eyes as she is portrayed as God in the film “A Little Bit of Heaven.” [\[PLAY\]](#) And Morgan Freeman’s portrayal of God in the movie “Bruce Almighty” is true to the Biblical witness that shows

God getting frustrated with the sometimes impossible people God has made when deciding to let Jim Carey try being God for a day. [\[PLAY\]](#)

It is indeed a question that every Christian asks, and I suspect that all of us carry images in our minds of what God is like, images formed from now-hazy childhood books or portrayals on tv or television preachers or films or Bible verses we happen to know or a hundred other ways those images get inside of us. And, as I indicated at the beginning, it would be impossible in one short sermon to address every image of God in order to answer this second question in our Lenten sermon series. In the Bible alone there are dozens and dozens of different (and sometimes contradictory) images of and metaphors for God. But when we remember that the Bible is not simply a book of sentences dropped down fully formed from on-high, but a 4000 year old collection of testimonies about folks' perception of themselves in relation to God, we can see why there are varying emphases and why there might even appear to be contradictory understandings. That is why we need not just a way of picking out verses here and there to understand God, but a way of seeing and interpreting that understands that there is in that 4000 year Biblical history a trajectory, if you will, to folks' understanding of God. And we also need to see that that trajectory contains, as its most fundamental characteristic, a conversation between God and humanity – which is also a conversation that you and I are invited to be a part of as we apply the witness of the Bible to our own lives and situations. Not to do these things is to treat the Bible disrespectfully for when we oversimplify the Bible we oversimplify our faith and are less able to deal with the complexity of life.

Given all of that, what I want to maintain is that there are two characteristics of God that perhaps most exemplify this trajectory of understanding, and they are represented well by our two scriptures for the morning: First, God is righteousness, and, second, God is love.

Righteousness. It's kind of a churchy word, isn't it? But it is a crucial word that is at the heart of who God is. It's used six hundred times in the Bible. Moreover, the word translated as "righteousness" is the very same word that is sometimes translated as "justice." They are the same word, the same concept. God is just; God is righteous. But what does that mean? Unfortunately, the most frequent uses of the word in ordinary language are either misguided or seemingly trivial. Sometimes we conflate "righteousness" and "self-righteousness." And to be self-righteous – smug and self-satisfied – is hugely different from the righteousness that is ascribed to God in the Bible. The other use may appear trivial but it's actually rooted in something important; the other day I heard someone in Starbucks say "This is a righteous cup of coffee." Now, that usage has come to be a synonym for "really good," but maybe my fellow Starbucks slurper meant more than that. Maybe he meant that the coffee was raised in a sustainable way with minimal pesticide use. Maybe he meant that it was a fair trade brew. Maybe he meant that it was produced by workers who were paid a living wage. Each of these uses of "righteous" indeed tie in well with what we imply when we talk about God's being righteous. What do I mean?

Well, during Advent, we often read a description of the Suffering Servant, the One whom we Christians believe was sent in the person of Christ and who displays what God is like. Here those words again which describe the kind of righteousness that defines who God is: *"I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations.... A bruised reed He will not break and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not be disheartened or crushed Until He has established justice in the earth...."* (Psalm 42 NASB). This description of Christ is also a description of God, and God's righteousness consists of bringing justice, of not further hurting those whom life has already hurt, and of not extinguishing hope for those whose hope already burns very dimly.

You may recall my super-duper simple rule for how to study the Bible; ask three questions: What does it say? What does it mean? So what? My friends, the “so what” here is that God also expects us to strive to emulate such righteousness in our lives. We don’t know anything about King Lemuel, who appears once in the Book of Proverbs, and we don’t know anything about his mother, but we do have her amazing words to him: *“Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable. Speak out in order to judge with righteousness and to defend the needy and the poor.”* (Proverbs 31:8-9 CEB).¹ But such a job description isn’t just for kings; no, it is for all of us who would follow the God of our Lord and Savior. **That’s** the “so what?” But let me tell you what my fear is today:

There is simply no question that throughout the Bible – the book that we cherish as a guide our faith – again and again and again God is depicted over the course of centuries as having a special interest that the homeless, the vulnerable, and the stranger be protected. That simply IS the righteousness of God. But my fear is that, whatever our theologies, whatever our politics, we’ve implicitly decided that honoring God’s concern is **optional**. The logic of **God’s** righteousness is these folks matter, therefore we must take their situation seriously and work on it. But our culture increasingly says, instead, “these folks **don’t** really matter that much, so caring for them is optional.” Some of the blame can be laid at the feet of what has been called in the last two decades “the prosperity gospel” – the point of view that says that the amount of wealth and security you have is an index to how much God loves you, and, conversely, if you lack the money to buy your children food or you sleep under a bridge it is evidence that God doesn’t care for you – and so neither should anyone else. This is not the Gospel. Let me repeat: This is not the Gospel. As our guest preacher Chris

¹I will always be grateful to the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell for first introducing me to these marvelous words.

Dorsey said six weeks ago, "Compassion is not just an *option* for Christians."

This is one of the reasons that I'm excited about the launching of the new Missions and Outreach Committee-sponsored "Compassion in Action" discussion and advocacy group this Tuesday evening. One of you asked me if this is simply a group for "liberals." The answer is no. Because I believe – I want to believe – that Christians of every theological stripe would want to align themselves with God's righteousness in saying that the poor and the vulnerable and the homeless and the stranger are worthy of being protected better than they now are. We may well differ in how that happens – that's why it's a discussion group where you and I will learn from each other. But it will be a group that takes seriously that God's righteous concerns for those who are hurting is not, indeed, an *option* for us to follow up on. I can't help but think that it is a righteous concern of God's – and therefore a concern for Christians of every theological persuasion – that in the last few months dozens of mosques have been threatened, vandalized, or burned to the ground, that one-hundred forty synagogues have received bomb threats, that little boys and little girls are bullied and harassed and physically threatened at school because their names are "different" or they wear a hijab or they pray facing east. "Seek ye first.... God's righteousness," the song says, and this group will help us to do so, learning from other Christians and from one another about how best to confront and ameliorate these things that do not honor a God of righteousness.

The second trait that I want to focus on this morning actually stems from this trait of God as righteousness: God is love. You see, God's interest in justice and righteousness is not an abstract concern. No, God's love is part and parcel of God's righteousness. To explain what I mean, let me focus for a moment on just one metaphor for understanding God, that of "parent." Jesus uses it many times, of course, often talking about His Father, sometimes about his Mother. The rest of the Bible is replete with references to God as our parent. Now, I know that for some, this is

a problematic image; there are those who had parents who were distant, absent, or even abusive. God's heart aches for that. And yet I still believe that this image can be a powerful way into understanding both God's love and God's righteousness. Why? Well, any one of you who are parents know what it is like to love your child fiercely and without reservation. Oh, you may dislike what they do sometimes, and at certain ages you pine for a room of your own far away, but you love them no matter what. That's what God does, except God does so perfectly. God's love is unconditional for every beloved child God has made. What's more, if you have more than one child, you love each of them just as fiercely, but you know that loving them fiercely does not always mean loving them exactly the same. One of your children may be super-confident, never at a loss for words, and has no doubt that he or she can do pretty much anything. With *that* child you express your love by helping caution him or her against the sin of smugness and a tendency not to listen to others. You may have another child who is shy, who lacks confidence, who is often more fearful. With *that* child you express your love by helping him or her be more confident, to understand that they too are gifted. You tailor the **expressions** of your love to the child because that, in fact, is the most loving thing you can do.

God's love is like that and the fact is that among God's children there are those who need special attention, special help, special aid – *because expressing love purely equally would in fact be unjust*. Those who are hurting, homeless, hopeless, those who are the stranger and the vulnerable and the “different,” need love in a different way than those who are privileged and well-fed and safe. Which brings us back to the “so what?” How does God express that love, that righteousness? Through you and me. The 16th century poet and mystic Teresa of Avila wrote this haunting reminder: *“Christ has no body but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours, Yours are the eyes with which he looks Compassion on this world, Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,*

Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, Yours are the eyes, you are his body."

Yours. **Yours.** It is sometimes a scary thing to represent God's love and righteousness. It will call us out of our comfort zones. It will ask us to put God's special care for the most needy ahead of a politics that too often prizes punishing the poor. It will ask us to think and not just swallow slogans. It will ask us to, as Darryl so eloquently taught us in his class, to recognize our privilegedness and use it for the sake of those whose lives have known very little privilege. It will ask us to examine our motives and to tame our tongues. But all of these things are and can also be a wondrous joy and opportunity to more fully know our God of righteousness and love and to more fully emulate our Savior.

Or, as John so much more succinctly put it: *"if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us... [for] God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."*