

Sermon for February 10, 2008

Readings: Psalm 18:1-3; Luke 13:31-35; John 8:12; Acts 2:1-4

Rev. Curt Anderson

“Images of God”

Worship during Lent is being structured by the prayer – commonly called The Lord’s Prayer – that Jesus taught the disciples, as told in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. There is much to say about this prayer from a scholarly point-of-view: including the fact that the last phrase, “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever,” was probably not part of the original prayer – which is attested to by the fact that the last phrase is not in most modern Bibles.

But we are choosing church practice over scholarship this season, so that last doxology in the prayer, those final words of praise, will give focus to worship on Easter Sunday morning.

Today is the first phrase of the prayer, “Our Father, who art in heaven.” Today, we are thinking about Images of God. And while I said that this would be a sermon on church practice, I want to begin with an arcane academic issue – whether the Biblical images of God are metaphors or similes.

Now how in the world can metaphors and similes matter to us, You ask. Isn’t this an esoteric detour, a hidden side road, away from the really important super-highway of church practice, and the freeway of freedom from fatigued, failed, old-fashioned images?

Doesn’t the modern interstate of truth – to stretch my metaphor well beyond the breaking point – lead past these dark and quarrelsome caverns, these internecine, incestuous entanglements, out into the broad, sun-drenched expanses of contemporary life?

The first answer I’m tempted to give to that question is one I’ve really come to enjoy in the last year or two, since our newest ordained colleagues have joined the staff.

After I make a major statement or pronouncement on an obscure, mystifyingly cryptic issue that few people have heard of – and even fewer care about – I turn to my two much more newly ordained colleagues and ask: *But Eldonna (or Jerry), you’ve been to seminary much more recently than I. Tell us what the current thinking is on this topic.*

I’m not going to bore you with a long discussion about metaphor and simile. God the Father is a metaphor. God is like a nursing mother is a simile. The metaphor suggests a more intimate connection between the two items than the simile: a more complete identification of the two terms, in this case God and Father.

But is that really important? Only a little.

With the view of women as subordinate to men in ancient Israel, it’s actually somewhat surprising that feminine images for God made it into the Bible at all.

What is most important in terms of our use of images for God today is **not** to choose only 1, but to use a multiplicity.

I have read (red) books by some authors that say **Father** is the only – or at least by far the best – image or name for God. And I’ve read books by some feminist authors who say Mother and other feminine terms are the only – or by far the best – images for God.

Most of these authors are right about the importance of the positive images they talk about; and they are also, I believe, mostly wrong about the other images, which they denigrate.

We don't need to choose whether God is Father or Mother, or only one of dozens of other possibilities. Our problem is not choosing one right image, to somehow get God right. We never get God right. Our thoughts, words, concepts are always inadequately small and narrow. We need to expand the ways we think about God.

We need to let the great variety and multiplicity of Biblical images for God enrich our times of prayer and devotion, our lives of faithful discipleship.

I would like to explore a few of the many Biblical images of God, to ask how they might help us reach toward further and deeper understanding.

The Psalm we heard earlier sees God as a rock, a fortress, a shield, a stronghold; or rather – my rock, my fortress, my shield, my stronghold. These images speak of a God who provides support in trial and suffering, and a strong base or foundation from which to face the storms of life.

These images lead to a God who is my rock of strength, a fortress and foundation which keeps me from falling under the pressures of life, a *very present help in trouble*, in the words of another Psalm.

Generally, I have been very lucky, and have led a mostly trouble-free life; but in those times of serious health questions or job struggles, it has been wonderful to know that God can be relied on.

In some times like those, what I needed was not a new path to try out, but a safe harbor from the storm; not more light and truth to break forth, but the same strength and compassion that I had known previously.

As I have mentioned to you before, the last church I served was a bad fit for me. Coming home to Joan and to our garden at the end of the day was always a relief. And turning to God in prayer was a renewal. My prayer-life, which had been duty- and task-oriented before, became a relaxation and a joy. There was a kind of melting away of anxiety and worry, as I reached for the strength that was beyond my strength, and the strong foundation which was a protection against fear.

Of course, our only need is not for support and strength in the midst of the storm. I would recall to your minds the reading from Acts, in which the presence of the Holy Spirit is felt as the rush of a mighty wind, and as tongues of fire.

Those are wonderful images, and they counter-act what I like to refer to as the fog-images of God. *God is always present. God's grace surrounds you. God's love and forgiveness are always there.* Kind of like being surrounded by the fog. Pea-soup grace. Misty, foggy forgiveness. There is nothing particularly active, or dynamic, or grace-filled about it. It's just there.

The wind and flame are active symbols, reminding us God's grace blows like the wind into and through our lives. *The Spirit blows where it wills.* God's forgiveness comes like the flame, moving us to action. God's presence is an offering, a gift, a vivid blessing.

The image Jesus uses in the Gospel of Luke, of himself as a mother hen, offers comfort, support and safety: *O Jerusalem. How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings; and you were not willing.*

There is another, evocative image in John, when Jesus says: *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.* I find that a particularly powerful image today, when the claims of materialism and militarism lead us ever deeper into death's darkness.

Also, those who sit unjustly locked away in dark prison cells, afraid they have been abandoned, can take comfort in knowing that God has not forgotten. Whether they are in Guantanamo Bay or Beijing, God's light still shines for them. The cell may be dark, but they are always held in God's light and hope.

In addition, that is a powerful image for someone suffering depression. There are fewer more lonely and isolated feelings than those brought on by that melancholy malady. Yet even in the internal prison of the mind, the light of Christ may freely penetrate and shine.

Jesus said: *I am the bread of life.* When we gather around Christ's table, to be fed and nurtured in Christ's Spirit, we take Christ into our souls and lives – as individuals, yes; but perhaps even more importantly, as Christ's community: gathered for worship, and for faithful mission and action in God's world.

The intimacy of that image – *the bread of life* – reminds us of the intimacy of our eternal union with Christ in God's Realm.

A variety and multiplicity of images may lead us to expand our vision of God. And a larger vision of God may lead to an expanded vision of God's concern for humankind and all creation.

We have attempted a small step in that direction in our worship bulletin. Following what is the practice of some of you already, in your saying of the Lord's Prayer in worship, we have added the options of Creator and Mother to Father, as ways to start that prayer.

The variety and multiplicity of Biblical images for God, provides us with a fuller understanding of God's actions in this world, and God's relationships with us.

It does not mean that we can think anything about God that we want to. Rather, it means there is available a depth and richness in our relationships with God that we have often missed or ignored.

This variety and multiplicity of Biblical images points us toward a God who cares for us in more ways than we have imagined. This expanding vision of God enriches and expands our lives of faith.

So for God's presence and love, which we can know and experience in so many ways, we give God thanks and praise. Amen.