

“What God Do You Worship?”

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May 25, 2014 Easter 6A

Acts 17:22-31 John 14:15-21

It's good to be back! Last week Tom and I were in California for our youngest daughter's graduation from college. We rented a cottage along the California coast where we could hear seals barking and gaze at the redwood trees. Our two other daughters and son-in-law joined us. We spent lots of time outdoors, walking the beaches, marshes and forests, and just hanging out together. It was a wonderful time. And I read a book! It was recommended by my daughter Talitha, called Girl, At the End of the World.

This is a short memoir by Elizabeth Esther, who was raised in a fundamentalist Christian community founded by her grandfather. By age nine, Esther was preaching the gospel on street corners to save people from hell. But she was also anxious about her own salvation, constantly fearing the judgment of a wrathful God. From age four she expected the end of the world to come at any time. Her house was usually full of family members and disciples in training, but one day she had a funny feeling she was alone. So she ran frantically from room to room searching for her mother, or any other human being. In a panic she concluded that the rapture had happened. Jesus had come back and taken everyone to heaven, and she had been left behind. Eventually she discovered everyone was outside looking at a huge branch that had fallen on their car. But this kind of tension and fear was a constant part of her childhood.

Esther's family took the Bible literally. And they followed what they believed to be biblical principles to raise children. Proverbs 23 (13-14) says, “Do not withhold discipline from your children; ... If you beat them with a rod, you will save their lives from hell.” That's in the Bible, folks! Esther's parents beat her regularly, in fact, several times a day, even when she was a baby. Esther believed her parents did this out of love and concern for her soul. She was also convinced that God must hate her for her many sins and short-comings. And she lived in fear and shame for not living up to the standard of perfection she believed God required.

Esther was home-schooled, so she had little contact with the outside world. But when she was a teenager, she attended public school because her father wanted her to evangelize the other students. In public school there was already a Christian fellowship group and she noticed these Christians were loving and joyful. She still lived in the harsh and highly controlled world of her parents, but she began to see another way. After college she married and managed to separate herself from the control of her family. Still, she suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome. And for years after that, she couldn't enter a church without having a panic attack. She finally found a way back to faith through the Catholic Church, where she could approach God through Mary. The God she grew up with was defined by authoritarian and violent men. Mary, the mother of Jesus, gave her a more compassionate and merciful view of God's ways in the world.

What we believe about God, how we imagine God is, matters. And there are many different views of God in the Bible. People may think they are taking the Bible literally, but everyone chooses which passages they will emphasize or privilege.

Here's an example. 2 Kings tells stories of the great prophet Elisha, who had God-given miraculous powers. In chapter 2 (v. 23'24) Elisha was traveling to Bethel when a group of young boys came out of the city and made fun of him. They called him a "baldhead." How would you guess a great prophet of God with miraculous powers would handle such a situation? Do any of you know the story? We don't teach this one in Sunday School. The Bible says Elisha turned and cursed the boys in the name of the Lord. And then two bears came out of the woods and tore the boys apart. End of story. What is that story supposed to teach us about God?

When Jesus' disciples tried to keep some children away from him, Jesus gathered the children in his arms and blessed them saying, "Let the little children come to me... for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs." Now granted, these children were not making fun of Jesus or doing anything bad that we know of. But it still gives a completely different view of God. Which God do you worship? The one who sets wild beasts against children who misbehave, or the one who welcomes children and blesses them? They are both in the Bible.

And this is not just a difference between a harsh Old Testament God and a loving God of the New Testament. There are plenty of images of a compassionate God in the Old Testament. The book of Lamentations says, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end..." (3:22-23). And many of the Psalms speak of God as "good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love..." (Ps. 86:15) And the New Testament has the book of Revelation, where God pours wrath out on the earth and sends angels to torture and kill those who will not repent (Rev. 9). It says that those who worship another god "will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire... in the presence of the holy angels." (ch. 14) What is God really like? Do you worship a God of mercy? Or a God of wrath? Can you have both at the same time?

Some people say we can't pick and choose which parts of the Bible to take seriously. You either have to accept it all, or you reject the whole thing. Really? I believe God speaks to us through the Bible. But even Jesus picked and chose different parts of the Bible to use. When he went to his hometown and stood up to read in the synagogue, he read from the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Lk. 4:18-19). And then he rolled up the scroll and sat down. The end. He was quoting from Isaiah 61 (1-2), only he left out part of verse 2, which mentions "the day of vengeance of our God." Why did Jesus leave out vengeance? Doesn't that count as picking and choosing?

Jesus even changed Old Testament laws. In the Sermon on the Mount he quoted Old Testament teachings saying, “You have heard that it was said, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’” That means if someone knocks your tooth out, you are allowed to retaliate, but only as much as someone has done to you. And that law was an important step in limiting the amount of damage someone could do to retaliate. But Jesus changed it. He said, don’t retaliate at all. He also quoted another Old Testament teaching, “You have heard that it is said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” And then he said, “But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.’” (Matt. 5:38-48).

Jesus picked and chose and changed scripture. And so do we, whether we are aware of it or not. Yes, it is God’s Word to us. But all of us have what we call a “canon within a canon.” Certain verses are more meaningful to us than others. Out of the whole Bible, everyone has a group of verses, sections or books that we favor, or use to interpret the rest of the Bible. And so you can have Christians who beat their children in the name of God. Or you can have Christians who swear off any kind of violence in the name of God. What God do you pattern your life after? What God do you hope *other people* will pattern *their* lives after?

And how does anyone decide which scriptures are important ? As I said earlier, it’s not simply a question of choosing the New Testament over the Old. As Christians we would certainly give Jesus’ words the most authority. But how do we sort through the rest?

Many people just take in what they’ve been taught in church, and if that no longer works for them, they leave. But we also need to use our own intuition and good sense. Which scriptures strike you as important or true? Which ones challenge you to live more fully? Which ones take up residence in your heart, or speak to you in some way? It helps to learn the context in which a story was written, and each one comes from a different context. What issues and problems do these particular words of scripture address, and how does that relate to what people understood about God at that time? And we also stay in dialogue with the traditions of the church, and other people, knowing that our own experiences and thoughts are limited. We need to hear from others and let them challenge us. God is much bigger and more dynamic than anything a human mind can grasp or imagine. And perhaps God will show us something new.

In the scripture David read this morning, Paul introduced some new ideas to the Gentiles of Athens. Paul had been traveling through Greece and was waiting there for his travel companions. As he waited he looked around the city and noticed the large number of statues and idols for the Greek gods. So he talked with people about it. He quoted their philosophers and poets, while asking them to consider a new way of understanding God. He talked about God as the creator of the world who gives life and breath to everything in it. Would God then need to live in something made by human hands? The philosophers and others wanted to hear Paul’s ideas and then judge them. But Paul told them that God was going to judge the world against the standard of righteousness found in Jesus, and to show it God raised Jesus from the dead. That’s when Paul lost many of

his listeners. But some wanted to hear more and said, “We will hear you again about this.”

Many people today say they don’t believe in God. But they may have many different ideas of who this God is they don’t believe in. Is it a God who inflicts violence and encourages war? Is it a God who controls everything that happens on the earth, sending favors to his friends, while punishing his enemies? A God who tells the rich they are entitled to everything they have, and the poor they deserve to suffer? What do we have to say to people who say they don’t believe in God? Or people who have rejected a harsh and punishing God? What words and actions can we point to, to offer a different picture?

Pete read from the gospel of John today, where Jesus told his disciples “I will not leave you orphaned... in a little while the world will not see me, but you will see me...” And so it is our job to help the world see Jesus. What can we tell people about him? Jesus preached to the poor and oppressed and gathered children in his arms. He taught people not to judge others, and not to take revenge, but and to love their enemies (Matt. 5 and 7). He challenged hypocrites and those who were self-righteous and welcomed sinners. And he taught that God loves the whole world (John 3:16) and said “I have come to bring you life in all its fullness” (John 10:10).

If Jesus reveals God, that’s the kind of God I can worship and pattern my life after. And the kind of God I would like to tell the world about. How about you?