

Fiery Messiah or Beloved Father?

Sermon on Luke 3:15-18, 21-22

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Trinity United, Ottawa

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Graham Standish, an American Minister whom Presbytery recently invited to give a workshop here on his 'Humble Leadership' ministry model, described the central task of ministers as "helping people to find **where** God is in their lives... Its 'location, location, location'" he joked, adopting that real estate adage.

But as all of you who have ever bought a house know, location is not really **all** that matters. For you to want to buy a house and stay, the house you find also has to be a safe, welcoming home for you. So does the God you find. And the church where you choose to look for God.

In our 'What in the World Do We Believe?' group this week, we're talking about Jesus and God. And in today's gospel story about John the Baptist and Jesus' Baptism, we are presented with a Jesus image and a God image that have very different emotional colours. Which ones match with your 'God scheme,' and which clash? It's interesting for us to notice the many hues of theological imagery, and then examine which kind of 'God home' we grew up in, and which kind we choose to make our home in today.

John the Baptist, who preached in what we might describe as a 'fire and brimstone' style, had quite a different relationship with God, than Jesus himself did. John describes the coming Messiah brandishing a menacing winnowing fork, to gather up the good wheat and burn away the useless chaff in eternal flames. John paints a fiery red Jesus of Judgment, whom frankly, I'm a little afraid of. What colour *is* chaff anyway? (Examining the skin of my arm.)

But at Jesus' baptism, the pure white dove of the Spirit descends, over a scene I imagine as calming blue waters and the healing greens growing on the Jordan's muddy shore. And the words of God to Jesus - that we are all entitled to hear as children of God - are this blessing from the ultimate affirming parent: "You are my beloved child. I am well pleased with you."

Can you feel that? Do you feel it here in this church? Do your children take God's love for granted, I hope?

The images of God and Jesus that we carry in our minds can make a huge difference in whether we feel safely at home in church, or would rather move at the first opportunity. And our God images effect whether we feel safely at home with our self, too. Theological imagery colours not only the way we see God, but also the way we see ourselves 'in the image of God' or as the likeness of Christ - or not.

I was interested to hear that Rev. Standish used to be a therapist, like Rev. Bruce Sanguin, a United Church minister who recently led a leadership workshop here too. Both spoke about the psychological underpinnings of healthy spiritual leadership and the psychological dimension of a healing Christian spirituality for today.

I have always felt that any good theology has to be psychologically healthy, to genuinely reflect and serve our God of Love. Spirituality and mental health are profoundly intertwined. I know from many conversations in my office, that our self esteem is deeply linked with our perception of how God sees us - which tends to mirror or shadow how we have learned to see God.

The 'colour of our Christ', if you will, can hurt us or heal us, influencing our vulnerability to depression and mental illness. And depression, as we now know and admit, sits in every pew. Invades almost any family at times. An overly judgmental, all-seeing God, internalized in our minds like an omnipresent cruel parent, can make us fearful of our faults and victims of our superego 'inner critic.' A fiery red image of God can leave us feeling like worthless chaff, suffering low spiritual self esteem. Belief in a harsh God can pave a fearful pathway to perfectionism and depression and even psychosis.

On the other hand, a loving God internalized in our minds through spiritual learning and experience, can gently bandage our 'wounded child' within. God's love can help heal the soul sores from a lack of parental love, from trauma or abuse. Seeing ourselves as beloved children of a forgiving God-parent, we may feel safe enough to express our regrets, change and move on. The God we can safely and openly talk to in prayer, helps us free up our Spirit energy, fuelling us with a flow of love to spare and to share.

In today's scripture, John the Baptist promises God's forgiveness, when we 'repent.' Now there is a word that needs rejigging, to get its healthy meaning in our minds! 'Repent' just means to turn back toward God. And we do need to repent from time to time, to be psychologically healthy.

We need a God who can help us sort our wheat from our chaff. A God who is good, to align our lives with justice and kindness. We need the gentle redirection that comes from a God who loves us unconditionally, for who we are, not for what we do. Who loves us so reliably that we learn self love, and feel empowered to do love. Rather than seeing ourselves as sinners who better shape up or we'll burn! That style of parenting has thankfully gone out of fashion. And along with it - in progressive Christian circles - that fear-mongering style of theology has disappeared too.

In a sermon on this passage of Luke, Bruce Sanguin wrote: "The church [has been] guilty of being merchants of sin, in order to justify its existence...I remember how my becoming a Christian required me to think long and hard about my depravity. The evangelist went to great lengths to convince me that from the moment of conception I was a reprobate sinner...only Jesus could save me...It [was] a threat to get people to buy what the church was selling." But sin - another word that needs rejigging in the context of a Loving God - "is not a confirmation of our utter depravity...It acts as a signal that we've strayed from our original condition as beloved children of God, and it's time to return."

Our images of God can hurt us or they can heal us. Sanguin writes that if you read the Bible thoroughly, you notice that over time the image of God matures from a harsh judge, warrior and winnower with fire, who loves us only if we are good, to a beloved 'Abba' Daddy, "whose love is with us before we've done one blessed thing right, and inspires us to do the right thing." The emerging God, Jesus' 'Abba' of the Our Father, "offers persuasive love, not coercive love."

Psychology in this age understands that fear and threats only change behaviour temporarily. They've studied what happens when that threatening parent or teacher leaves the room. - Whack! Thunk! Chaos.

Consistent loving guidance, on the other hand, transforms behaviour in an enduring way - whether mom is present or not! It does so because receiving reliable love

transforms our image of who we are - into someone lovable and good. I can thank my parents and my God, that I know I'm basically wheat ...with my share of chaff to clear!

Alas, some faithful folks have been misled to believe that an all- powerful, perfect God made 'his' first mistake, when he made them! Sometimes, in my ministry, I have worked in tandem with a therapist, offering the tools of scripture and the affirmation of a loving God to support people's recovery from depression and low self esteem. Sometimes its my job to help people find their first safe home in God's house. (This is one of those locations!)

Sadly, lots of people need to heal their childhood experience of a scary God or a judgmental, guilt-inducing church. Today's passage is one of the most useful psycho-spiritual healing tools in the Bible. Its message is a mantra for repainting the inner rooms of troubled minds. If you feel like chaff destined for the fire, listen for these words of holy scripture in your meditations. "You are God's beloved child. And God is so pleased with you!"

Repeat, like a mantra in your prayers: "I am a child of God, beloved."
Hear it, say it, sing it! It is true to the true God who is Love.
It is true for me and it is true for you.

Hymnsong: "I Am A Child of God" in More Voices

GATHERING PRAYER:

One: God of Healing Love,
All: we come to you hungry for encouragement,
thirsty for affirmation, searching
for strength and self acceptance.
One: Help us to find ourselves in Your image,
All: as our beloved, affirming, embracing parent.

CHALLENGE & BLESSING

Let us go out from here strengthened
by a Loving Presence,
knowing that we are created good
and empowered to do good
in the name of Jesus
and according to his vision of Kin-dom come.