

SEEING GOD DIFFERENTLY

Text: Isaiah 61:1-3; Philip. 2:5-11

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Introduction

What are the first five words that come to your mind when I say “God”? Turn off your church filter. Silence your inner censor. Who do you see?

In our country we are told that 85% or more of the population believe in God. But in what kind of God do we believe?

Your image of God comes from all sorts of sources – parents, movies, Sunday school classes, friends and enemies, and civil religion. And part comes from something deep inside. But wherever it comes from, it will change your life.

I’ve been reading a book by Michael J. Fox about his life with Parkinson’s disease. In the chapter on faith he tells about playing at a park. A brightly painted bus from what he calls an “evangelical church” was parked nearby. It was open for children to come and go, sort of a never-ending bible study. One he went on board. A man was standing over an ashtray, surrounded by kids, with a burning kitchen stove match in his hand. “I wouldn’t want to get any closer to this because it would burn me. And that would hurt, right? Now imagine thousands of these burning every part of your body, every inch of your skin. Well kids that’s what hell’s like. And it lasts forever. But here’s the good news...”

Fox writes that he never stuck around for the good news. And while he feels too blessed to be an agnostic he can’t bring himself to believe in a God or a faith that depends on fear to operate.

In what God do you believe? And what is it doing to you?

1. There are some images of God that tend to show up more often than others in our part of world. Ones that whether we are in the church or outside of the church color our lives.

Sometimes we see God as an overzealous policeman. God exists to lock sinners up and whack us with the nightstick of his wrath when we stumble. He is always running a morals speed trap, waiting to write us up for violating the limits.

This God makes you believe that judgement is always a looming possibility.

Sometimes we see God as benign old man. This is the God who kicked the universe into being, did some grand old miracles way back when, and then retired to rock on the front porch of eternity. This is the God of the graffiti seen on a London subway wall which said, "God is not dead, he's just moved on to some less ambitious projects." When you get down to it this God who makes little difference in the world.

To believe in this God is to believe that you may really be on your own.

Sometimes we see God as a butler or concierge on a cruise ship. This is a God who exists to fill orders – a Santa Claus for adults. "I'd like a house in the suburbs, a good looking spouse, 2.3 children, a great job with a secure future, and no tragedy. Oh, and I'd like a swimming pool with that." Anything else sir?

To believe in this God is to believe God exists to give you things.

Sometimes we see God as an overworked repairman. This is a God who is trying to do something about famine in Africa, handle the recession in the US, watch over the war in Afghanistan, and keep Hurricane Bill from getting to close to Bermuda. He doesn't have time to talk to you about your girlfriend, or listen to your petty concerns about the jerk you have to work with. He's got a bigger agenda.

To believe in this God is to believe in a busy God, but not a personal one. God helps those who help themselves.

And sometimes we see God as the all powerful one with an unstable personality. This is a God whose attitude toward you changes day-to-day. Author Anne Lamont writes:

"It was like believing in the guy who ran the dime store, someone with a kind face but who was always running behind and had already heard every one of your lame excuses a dozen times before - why you didn't have a receipt, why you hadn't noticed the product's flaw before you bought it. This God could be loving and reassuring one minute, sure that you had potential, and then fiercely disappointed the next,

noticing every little mistake and just in general what a fraud you really were. He was a God whom his children could talk to, confide in and trust, unless his mood shifted suddenly and he decided instead to blow up Sodom and Gomorrah."

To believe in this God is never be too sure where you stand.

So who do we believe in? One of these, none of these, a mix of them all? Is there anybody else up there we can talk to?

2. The Christian faith is based on a simple idea that unless God reveals himself, you can't know with much clarity who he is. If we want to know what God is up to in the world we need to look to Scripture and we need to look to Jesus Christ.

There are two discoveries that we can make almost immediately. A good God created a good world. And when the creation of you and me and all that is got off track, this God sets about to do everything necessary to heal it.

As the world goes it's crazy way we see God call a man named Abram to begin the healing process. Through Abram God says in Genesis 12:3 he will bless all the peoples of the earth.

But doesn't only call a man; he calls a people. For no reason but his mercy he calls Israel out of slavery into a relationship to know him, love him, and serve him. (Deut. 4:7) It's Israel's job to take the love they have received and demonstrate it for the sake of the world.

And what we begin see is that God is not motivated by the demolition of sinners, or providing good customer service to those who pray. He's not too busy to care for people, or too old and distant to make a difference in the world. God is driven by crazy compassion for the people and things he has made. And in that unruly compassion he just can't let us go without a fight.

When Israel reduces the privilege of having God's compassion to a private possession, God sends his Son Jesus to make even clearer his compassion for a lost and rebellious creation.

And so one day we see Jesus standing in a Nazareth synagogue reading to the congregation the Scripture of our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 61:1-3. Promises from the prophet given to Israel in their exile that God had not forgotten them, and that God's messiah would rescue them. But as he reads to them these hopeful words he leaves something out: the *day of vengeance of our God*.

And in that moment something becomes horribly clear to the crowd. The year of the Lord's favor come in Jesus Christ, will not be the day of vengeance of our God. No paybacks for old persecutions. No blood running in the streets. Even Israel's enemies are to be included in the messiah's healing mission. In Jesus Christ God's compassion outweighs God's vengeance. And the people loose their minds. This is a God-view they weren't prepared for.

Are we? God is *crazy compassionate* when it comes to the world. He's not interested in being nice or benign. He's chasing us down, one man, one woman at time until we says yes to his furious kind of love. He's like that momma who with a tug and shout jerks her wandering child out of the street. It looks a little harsh sometimes. But compassion doesn't stand by and watch the tragedy if it can do something about it.

3. What does it mean to see God differently? It means first for us to see him in Christ, and decide if this is the God in whom we believe.

This is where belief has consequences. As we believe so we become. When Paul writes his letter to the believers at Philippi, he wants them to become a certain kind of people. So he says, Your attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus...

So what was this *attitude*? When it comes to having the nature of God, writes Paul, Jesus did not grasp after divine privilege, but instead emptied himself preferring the nature of servant. (Philip. 2:6)

And when it came to having the nature of a man, he chose humility that lead to a scandalous death on a scandalous cross. (Philip. 2:8)

Paul is saying if we want to live Christ's life we'll have to have Christ's attitude. And Christ's attitude was the crazy compassion of a God who emptied himself of glory for the sake of the world, and the crazy compassion of man who would willingly suffer humiliation of a cross for the people who put him there.

In Christ the compassion of God chases after men and women at the cost of his life. He's the hound of heaven, not the membership director for the saved. If we would see God differently we need look no further than Jesus.

4. So what might happen to us if we came to believe in a God whose very nature is the compassionate pursuit of broken people? What might happen to me if the attitude of Jesus Christ came to mind when I heard the word “God”?

Brennan Manning is an author who has wrestled with that. His has been a life marked by much struggle, much sin, much brokenness. And out of that and his belief in God he wrote a book called “Lion and Lamb: The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus Christ.”

He says:

When the night is bad and my nerves are shattered and the waves break over the sides, Infinity speaks. God Almighty shares through his Son the depths of His feelings for me, His love flashes into my soul, and I am overtaken by mystery.

What are you hearing in the dark? Is God furiously compassionate for you? Is that what you are living with, or is it something else and something less? We never outgrow the need to remember that we are the object of a love that will not let us go.

When that happens the relentless tenderness of Jesus Christ becomes my story as well as his. It becomes my hope, my aspiration, and finally the character of my discipleship. I find God’s mission becoming my own. I’m a chapter in a bigger story that’s heading someplace bigger than all my hopes.

That will turn a church inside out and upside down, you know. When it’s in the water, programs, priorities, and passions begin to look different. Even the old ones feel different. How could it be otherwise?

Conclusion

What are the first five words that come to your mind when I say God? If you are ready for a new picture you don’t have to wait for a mystical encounter. Find a quiet place and open an old book.

One mid-winter writer Philip Yancey locked himself in his isolated Rocky Mountain cabin in order to read his Bible straight through. He wanted the big picture. When he finished, Yancey concluded that the Bible was not about moral laws but rather about a romance, following the story of God, the Jilted Lover. One will to suffer even humiliation from the people he created. God simply loves his wayward world too much to let it go.

Are we ready to discover so great a love?