

The God We Imagine

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Emmanuel Friedens Church, Schenectady NY

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Reading:

James 1:17-27

1:17 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

1:18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

1:19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; 1:20 for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.

1:21 Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

1:22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

1:23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror;

1:24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.

1:25 But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act--they will be blessed in their doing.

1:26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.

1:27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

How do we imagine God? And what difference does it make? I want to have a conversation with you this morning about the ways in which we imagine or picture God, and how that affects the way we live in the world.

I want to do this in part because some of you weren't able to be with us when we took the question up as a group at our potluck lunch a couple weeks back. It was one of many that we talked about one on one. Pat Bumbarger got us to share a little as a group, that day. Marian Shearer suggested revisiting it with all of us today.

So how do you imagine God? I want to ask you to take a three minutes to share with a neighbor or two—no need to get up, just someone near you. Take your time, but that's three minutes for all of you together, not apiece. And then I will come through with the microphone and we'll share a little...

The reading we shared this morning is from the Letter of James, a book of the bible beloved by some and despised by others. The best known church leader of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, called it ‘the epistle of straw’ in his earliest introduction to his translation of the scripture. Early on he thought it should be removed from the bible, although he backed off the position later on! Luther’s questions notwithstanding, there is some possibility this little book is based in the teachings of James, the brother of Jesus. Whoever wrote the letter, the brother of Jesus or some other James many years later, the writing wants to redefine what it means to be holy and pure—in radical and liberating ways. And bases it on a particular imagining of who God is.

“Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.”

For the writer of this ancient letter, the God who made the stars, the vast universe, was the “Father of Lights”: the one unchanging Being in the spinning worlds; the Source of all goodness. The maker of everything good, the writer tells us, is the source of any good thing we take part in and do! SO it makes sense doesn’t it? If you want to be connected to the maker, do some good! Don’t just sit around contemplating and paying and saying “Thank you God for making me a wonderful person”.

DO some Good. That’ll connect you to the Source of all Goodness. And what was good for James? For many in that time being good meant being pure, staying spotless! But James refuses to stop with personal purity—and defines goodness and purity in the same way Jesus does in the gospels so often—genuine religiousness is not about personal purity by itself—to be real it is about real welcome, and real receptiveness to very different people—especially folk who are poor, or to those on the edges—in James’ time it was women who were widowed and therefore had no property, and orphans—who because there was no social security net had no source of support! It is about not being partial to some over others, because of their class or education. This kind of justice, put in practice on the personal and relational and church and society level—that’s the heart of the life that James’ sense of who God is compels.

So how does our imagining of God shape the way we live? For those who see God primarily in terms of being an exacting Judge, life can be all about doing what it takes to work our way out of condemnation. Or can it lead to something different? For those who imagine God primarily as a Spirit, close around, how we live is often conceived as responding to the whispers and influences and presence of a deity close around. For those whose God is primarily about grace and forgiveness personally, faith is first and foremost about experiencing and accepting that forgiveness.

This question of how we imagine God is very important on three levels. First, we often imagine God almost subconsciously in ways that we got as children, but we no longer really want to think are right. So if you grew up with a judging God, and a church that taught you that you were going to a very hot place if you didn't keep the rules, along with confessing the right creed, that can shape your attitudes and actions long after you come to believe in a more merciful and loving God. There is important work to be done on the personal level about looking honestly into our own souls, and naming both the God who is our "baggage", and the God in whom we actually trust and in whom we want to live. Each of us has the right and responsibility as people of faith, not simply to adopt what we were handed, but to examine and re-shape our operating assumptions not only about who God is but also what is holy...and how that shapes our day to day lives!

On the second level we need to acknowledge that there are many good ways to imagine a God, the One who is in fact the source of our minds and imaginations, and bigger than any image. We may not use the language of Father of lights! But let us acknowledge that God is the Namer beyond naming, the Light behind lights. A lot of us Christians get in trouble with our relationships when we come to the conclusion that it's only our way of imagining, or the highway to perdition.

Of course to say all this is not to say that every image and imagining of God is just as right or good as others. Some ways of conceiving God are quite oppressive...and I am talking about *Christian* notions, not our stereotypes of someone else's beliefs out here! We like to pick on other religions—but within our own faith there is a vast array of ways of thinking about God—and ways of living out our convictions!

How do you imagine God? And what difference does it make? As a church we don't have one right answer, one official imagining. What we do have is a journey together, a pilgrimage to love and understanding and justice. We started today by quoting James. I invite you to join me in closing by sharing a more recent witness, this one from New Zealand, of all places.

(Unison Reading: *Affirmation of Faith* from the *New Zealand Prayer Book*, #886 in the *New Century Hymnal*)