

“Do You Want to See God?”

A sermon delivered July 11, 2010, at Foley UMC, by Dr. Lance Moore.

Genesis 1:26-27

“Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

Hebrews 1:1-3

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.”

1st John 4:12-17

“No-one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him.”

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Millions of tourists journey to a town in northern Italy to a Roman Catholic Cathedral for the sole purpose of spending a few moments gazing at a piece of faded cloth. The cloth is known as the “Shroud of Turin,” a faded yellowish herringbone linen that is purported to be the burial shroud of Jesus Christ, and through a mysterious process, has his face imprinted upon it in a monotone, sepia negative that is best seen as a photographic negative. On the cloth itself, some people can hardly make out the image of Jesus at all. Nevertheless, people travel thousands of miles and wait for hours in line for a short glimpse at the image. Obviously, we have a strong yearning to see the face of God.

In our video-based society, we put so much emphasis on appearances—the cosmetic and the visual—it isn’t enough for us to *read* about God or even to commune with God in prayer. We want to *see* God. We believe “a picture paints a thousand words.” We believe that only “seeing is believing.” We all live in “the show me state.” We overlook the fact that appearances can’t always be trusted.

For one thing, we see things through the lens of our own experience. My biases, my preferences, my particular slant on the world filters and distorts all that I look at. If we come at a situation with a preconceived notion, often we see what we want to see rather than seeing the truth. Ask any law enforcement official about how five “eyewitnesses” can “see” five different versions of the same event!

Likewise, our mental picture of God may not be accurate. We tend to project onto God our own desires and opinions rather than letting God be God. If we feel judgmental and vengeful of our enemy, then we see God as a vicious tyrant ready to strike them down for the slightest sins. Or, if we have no self-control or self-discipline, perhaps we see God as a laidback, easygoing God of cheap grace who never holds us accountable. If we are materially obsessed, we see God as a magic genie who grants our wishes upon command. If we are egocentric and anti-social, perhaps we see a private God who is our personal buddy and no one else’s. Each of these pictures of God are distorted and colored by our biased lenses, or by the angle of perspective of our vista.

The way we guard against these twisted notions and idolatrous portraits of God is to **study Scripture**. The Bible is the first and foremost picture we have of God. If you want to know God better, get to know your Bible better! The gospel descriptions of Jesus, as God Incarnate, are the clearest portrait available. As we read in Hebrews, Jesus is “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being....” Yes, if you want to see God, look to Jesus... and if you want to know Jesus, read the gospels.

And there another means by which we can get a glimpse of the nature of God: we can see God reflected in Creation—in the beauty of nature, yes, and especially in God’s human creation. The Bible tells us that God looks like *us*. True, sin has blurred the image, but the “family resemblance” is still there. As Paul said, “we are his offspring.”

Take a look at Michelangelo’s painting of the Creation Story on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Adam is stretched out on earth and reaching up to touch God, who is hovering above, reaching down to touch Adam. Take the white hair and beard from God’s image and draw it mentally onto Adam’s face. Except for an age difference, they are one in the same face—identical twins! Was this a mistake on Michelangelo’s part? No, he took literally the description of creation in Genesis: “God created humankind in his image... male and female.”

Everything good that we see in humanity has been put there by God, as if we have inherited divine DNA for love, grace, caring, forgiveness, laughter, compassion.

When we are at our best, the image of God is shining in us and through us. Again, while it may be imperfect, blurred and biased, seeing the image of God in ourselves is, overall, a good way to come to know something of what God looks like, of God's character.

When I lived in Pensacola, I was called upon occasionally to preach at the women's prison. As you can imagine, it was an interesting experience to be the only male in a roomful of female convicts. Anyway, the "chapel" was also the cafeteria, but the prison official had allowed the inmates to soften its institutional look and make it more like a church. A woman prisoner had painted a wonderful portrait, a large mural, on the wall of the cafeteria/chapel. It was a picture of Jesus and his disciples in the upper room, much like Da Vinci's famous *Last Supper* portrait. But there was something odd, even comical, about this painting in that women's jail. Jesus and his men all had beards, but if you looked into their faces, they were all women! At first I laughed to myself, then I thought more sternly: "This is heresy, to paint Jesus with feminine attributes." But later, I began to understand. For these incarcerated women at the bottom of society, many who had been abused by men and now imprisoned by male judges and male guards, there was something powerful in being reminded that they, too, were made in God's image. You may find it uncomfortable to think of God as female, because most of the metaphors and pronouns of the Old Testament are male. But Genesis states that males AND females were created in God's image: women have been imbued with God's feminine traits. And Jesus spoke of God in more than male terms. Jesus taught a parable about God being like a diligent woman who lost a coin. Another time, Jesus said, "How I would like to gather my children of Jerusalem up like a mother hen gathers her brood." This beautiful, mothering trait in our Lord was something I could see even in those lady criminals. The female inmates grieved over the fact that their children no longer had mothers. They had a great incentive to get straight so they could be better mothers. Some of them shared these concerns with me in conversation. But their broken-hearted love was most apparent during prayer time, when various inmates would lift up heartrending prayers for their families. In those prayers, I caught glimpses of God's love.

Yes, even in the criminal we can sometimes see the image of God. God made us, and as someone said, "God don't make no junk!" God has impressed the divine image upon our souls, and when we are at our best, it shows through and even inspires others.

Dr. Paul Brand illustrates this in a book entitled, [In His Image](#). A world-renowned surgeon, now a professor at LSU Med School, Dr. Brand spent a good portion of his life as a missionary to lepers in India. At one point there, he spent a year training interns. Dr. Brand observed one of his interns diagnosing a patient for venereal

disease. It was a sensitive issue, and the intern put on a peculiar, gentle, caring expression. Dr. Brand was stunned. Later, he interrogated the intern: “That facial expression, it was as if you were imitating my old boss, Dr. Pilcher of England. Have you ever been to England, do you know Professor Pilcher?” The other students stared at him with confused silence. Finally, two or three of them grinned, “We don’t know any *Professor Pilcher*,” one said, “but Dr. Brand, that was *your* expression he was wearing.” Dr. Brand had received an imprint of his teacher’s instincts: his expression, his very smile. That kindly smile, useful for cutting through the fog of embarrassment to encourage a patient’s honesty, had been impressed on Dr. Brand’s image, carried across the seas, and imprinted on the face of a young intern.

Likewise, God’s character is imprinted, passed on, and reflected all around us. The early church father, Athanasius, stressed this doctrine of the image of God: all the good and beautiful traits of God—creativity, kindness, laughter, love—were inscribed, like an image on a coin, into the human visage. This fallen world wears away at the image, so that just as the face on a circulated coin begins to fade, sin and corruption blurs the image of God in us. But like a coin being sent through the die again and re-cast, through the renewing picture of Christ’s Incarnation, and via the revitalizing power of His Holy Spirit within us, we can again reflect God’s goodness and holiness.

Yes, look around you and you will see glimpses of God. I see glimpses of God when I see church members running our Vacation Bible School, or working for Habitat for Humanity, or volunteering in local schools, or visiting hospitals and nursing homes, or teaching little children in Sunday school classes, or traveling on mission trips, or in the choir, singing joyful praises. I see faces of God everywhere. Christian servants are all around in this church and community, and every-time one of you gives up something of yourself to care and love others, **you are the image of Christ, you are a representation of God’s love.**

We can catch glimpses of God in the joy of children. And in turn, when we had the eyes of a child, we were more quick to discover the miraculous all around us. However, over the years, our spiritual eyes dim, clouded by the cataracts of callous skepticism. Beware. The drudgery of the mundane, the tyranny of materialism, and the other sour poisons of this world—sarcasm and cynicism—can wear the magic out of you. One of my favorite stories is the modern fairy tale, Peter Pan. Many of you saw an interesting spin-off from that myth in the movie entitled, *Hook*, starring Dustin Hoffman and Robin Williams. The plot is that Peter Pan left the magical realm of Neverland, grew up, married Wendy, settled down and got a j-o-b. A job can rob the magic out of anyone! So over the years, the grown-up Peter Pan, pre-occupied with phones and calendars and budgets, forgot Neverland, could no longer fly, could no longer see faeries or throw pixie dust. He lost the ability to comprehend the abstract

or spiritual. Then through a series of events, he finds himself back in Neverland... but without any of his powers, without any of the childlike joy that once filled his heart, and blind to the whimsical fantasy all around him. The way he regains his powers is when he sits down for a meal with the Lost Boys, and they begin a banquet of imaginary food. Finally, through the eyes of the children, he begins to see what they see—make-believe food thrown about in a fun “food fight.” Suddenly, Peter Pan “gets it.” He regains the ability to fly, to make magic, to view the noetic, the poetic, the mystical, the imaginative. He was able to see with the mind’s eye. Beyond the veil. To the transcendent.

Jesus said something very similar: he said that unless we have the eyes of a child and a child-like heart, we will never see the Kingdom of Heaven. Don’t let this world rob you of the ability to see the faeries! Look for God. Watch for the divine. Find your “inner Lost Boy.” Because faith is *not* a fairy tale. God is truth. God is love. And wherever you find love in action, if you look with the right eyes, you can see the divine.

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