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A SNAPSHOT OF THE BIG PICTURE

Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17

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If you were to take a picture of God, what kind of image would you create? Would it look like the universe through the Hubble telescope? That image would show the majestic work of the invisible Creator God. Maybe you would take a picture of something closer to home like a meadow of wildflowers, a running stream, or a snowy mountain. Would you capture an image of God reflected in human actions like a mother holding a nursing child, a father waiting to welcome the prodigal home, or a soldier carrying a fallen friend from the field? Possibly your image would look like Jesus healing the leper or Jesus holding children in his lap? Perhaps you have in your mind Pentecost – with the Spirit coming like tongues of fire on gathered disciples.

How do we know who God is? How we see God determines how we live. There are many who believe that we can have some knowledge of God through our reason. Within the human mind, spirit, and moral conscience, there is an intuitive sense of God. The very fact that humanity has always pondered the question of God and longed for God points to the existence of God. Yet, all these ways of knowing God are incomplete in themselves. These ways alone cannot give us a true picture God. What we think we

may know of God through philosophy, nature, reason, or the conscience may give us confused ideas about God. False ideas about God have been used to justify hatred, genocide, terrorism, and religious fanaticism.

How can we get a true picture of God? We know God because God has spoken to us in the Scriptures – in the story of creation and in the history of Israel, from Abraham to Moses and from Moses to the prophets. God has spoken to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and in the story of the church. Think about it this way: I may know a person from what I observe about her from the outside. Perhaps she is a mother, a friend, a yoga enthusiast, and a graphic artist. Yet, I do not really know her until she speaks to me and reveals her inner life to me. In a similar way, knowing about God and knowing God are not the same thing. God speaks to us through the Bible. We test everything else we may think we know of God through what we know of God in the Bible.

The picture of God revealed in the Scriptures is not just any God, but the God who creates, redeems, and sustains. In the first centuries of the church, the church struggled to express its understanding of the being and

character of God. This is how we have the doctrine of the Trinity. The Scriptures led the church to express its faith in God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is profoundly important that we know God not only as the Creator who fashioned the universe out of nothing, but also as the God who continues to be intimately involved in redeeming and sustaining the whole of creation. God accomplishes this work of redemption by sending the Son, Jesus Christ, to be fully human and fully divine. God continues to be with us in the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of God in Christ with us, bringing the creation to fulfillment.

The God we know in Scripture commands our attention and seeks our obedience. Isaiah was going about his priestly duties in the Temple when God filled the sanctuary and took Isaiah's breath away. The contrast between the holiness of God and Isaiah's sinful human nature overwhelmed him. He cried out, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips." He had signed on to be a priest performing daily duties. It was a routine he knew well. He had no idea of ever being a prophet.

Yet, God cleansed him and made him a prophet. In the most

difficult days of Jerusalem, Isaiah spoke God's word of judgment, grace, and hope. He was an ordinary man – an earthen vessel – chosen for a divine task. His strength came from God. He was a clay jar into which the Lord poured the word to speak. Isaiah had a new image and understanding of God.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of the character of God and the ways we encounter God. The creator of the heavens and the earth has come to us in Jesus Christ to set us free from sin and death and fill us with the Holy Spirit so that we might live as beloved children of God. Paul speaks of two ways of living in the world: life according to the flesh and life according to the Spirit. When we live according to the flesh we are living apart from God, without any true picture of who God is and what God has done for us. When we live a life "according to the flesh," we are living a life centered in our sinful self. To live according to the flesh is to live a life in the darkness dominated by our ego, desires, and self-deception.

To live according to the Spirit is to live a life oriented toward God. It is to have within the heart and mind a true vision of who God is and what God asks of us. It is to move from the bondage of sin to the freedom of faith. It is to live a Christ-centered life as a beloved child of God. It is to have in the heart and mind a snapshot of the

big picture of who God is. Having a vision of this gracious, creative, redeeming, and sustaining God, Paul will even go so far as to say in Galatians, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me and the life I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me" (2:20). When we have a true picture of God, we live in the light and in the power of the Spirit so that the deep cry, "Abba, Father," is the most natural thing of all. In Paul's words, we encounter God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Who is God? The question became real for me when I visited the Hagia Sophia, or the Church of Holy Wisdom, in Istanbul. This enormous church has stood in that city for nearly 1500 years. It was built in the 6th century by the Emperor Justinian two hundred years after the Nicene Creed was written. For 1000 years, its dome was the largest in the world. It was dedicated to the logos or wisdom of God incarnate in Jesus Christ. After the fall of Constantinople, it became a mosque, then a museum, and now a mosque again. Through the years, many of the ancient mosaics were covered over, damaged, or destroyed, but others have been uncovered and remain. To see what remains of the mosaics, and to imagine what it would have looked like before time, earthquake, and religious upheaval took their toll, is to experience the mystery of our faith. In many ways, the Hagia Sophia is the Nicene Creed in

stone. As I looked at what remains of the central mosaic of Christ, I thought of the words of this our most ancient and universal creed. "I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human." There is the truth in colored glass and stone.

How we see God makes a difference in how we live our lives. If we want to live a good and useful life, then we need to know God and know ourselves. John Calvin expressed it this way: "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves" (*The Institutes*, I.1.i.). To know God is to know how God wants us to live. It is one thing to say we believe in God; it is quite another thing to open our hearts and minds to God so that God may guide and direct our paths. In short, it is easy to profess faith in God, but to live as an agnostic. The wise are those who keep before them a true picture of God so that they may live their lives to the glory of God.

One of the wisest men I have known, whose life gave me a

snapshot of the big picture, was a retired Naval Captain in our church in Norfolk. Captain Denny had not had an easy life. He had known war at sea; his young son was killed in a freak car accident when the family was moving across the country to take a new assignment. Before I knew him, his beloved wife had died of cancer. He chaired our Peacemaking Committee, because as a naval officer, he knew the cost of war. He served on our Evangelism Committee because he knew the joy of life that only Christ can bring. Despite his age and arthritis, he would walk the streets of his neighborhood each day and strike up conversations with the folks he met. He would get to know them and invite them to church. Our church grew because of him. It grew because of who he was. He lived with a profound sense of gratitude to the God who created the universe and filled it with beauty; he was never judgmental because he knew the grace of Jesus Christ and extended that grace to everyone he met. Filled with the Spirit, he saw each person as a beloved child of God. Whenever I wonder what God looks like, I keep in my mind the memory of Captain Denny for his life was a snapshot of the big picture.

Today we honor those who have sacrificed to serve our country. When you look at the lives of those you know whose memory we honor today, what kind of image of God did they leave with you? They lived with gratitude in

the world God created; they were willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of others. I imagine they found courage and hope in the Spirit of God who sustained them every step of the way. In their lives they too gave us a snapshot of the big picture: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Blessed Trinity.