

SERMON: “The God We Can Know”

Text: Exodus 34:4-10

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to sketch God’s character with the lines of unfailing love, and to invite the hearer into a personal relationship with God.

Introduction: Girl Making a Picture of God

- I. Who is God?**
 - A. Creator/Divine/Force/Father/Omni/Judge/Clock-Winder/Person/*The Shack***
 - B. Heseed: Unfailing Love (Steadfast Love)**
 - 1. Unfailing Presence**
 - 2. Unfailing Redemption**
- II. Welcome God into Your Life**
 - A. God *Wants* to Know You!**
 - B. Invitation to God’s Embrace**

Response to the Word: Holy Communion

I don’t know what your first image of God was, but when I was a child, I longed to know what God looked like. I knew what Jesus looked like, or thought I did, because his picture hung on my wall. I knew what the Holy Spirit looked like, or thought I did, because the Spirit was a dove resting on the head of Jesus when he was baptized. I even knew what the Devil looked like, or thought I did, because of the Halloween costume someone wore when he or she arrived for trick-or-treat. But God? What could God possibly look like? You can imagine my enthusiasm, then, when I watched the television special *The Littlest Angel*, one Christmas and discovered that God looked like EG Marshall sitting on an exalted throne with a long, flowing white beard. So that’s what God looked like!

Actually, not so much. We don’t really know what God looks like; do we? A teacher of a parochial school once gave her first-grade class an assignment to draw a picture—anything their mind could imagine! One small girl set busily to work. Curious, the teacher sauntered over to her desk and asked, “What are you drawing?”

Without looking up, the girl replied, “I’m making a picture of God.”

“You must know,” the teacher pressed, “that no one knows what God looks like.”

“Well,” she continued without missing a stroke, “they will in a moment, when I finish.”

One of the exercises I ask of my confirmation classes is exactly that: to draw a picture of God. It is always interesting to see what images the youth come up with: rays of light,

crosses, whirlwinds, sunshine. Sometimes they emphasize God as Creator, or a divine angel, or a magistrate robed at judgment. One person drew a picture of a person winding a clock; another drew Yoda summoning The Force. I have a friend who calls God, 'Omni' (omnipotent/omniscient/omnipresent, etc.). In the book *The Shack*, which some of you have read, God is an African woman who cooks up a storm in the kitchen!

So what IS God like? Theology is the study of God. Entire libraries are written on the portrait, nature and character of God. The short sermon I am preaching this morning cannot begin to give a comprehensive sketch! But...there is one descriptive self-portrait that God reveals to us in Exodus, chapter 34:4-10. I invite you to turn to it with me...

Introduce and read Exodus 34:4-10 (follows idolatry w/Golden Calf/second set of commandments).

What is it that God abounds in? Steadfast love. Unfailing love. Love that will not quit. Love that goes the distance. Love that you can depend on. It is sad that so many dismiss the God of the Old Testament as a vengeful, wrathful judge and executioner. It is true that God holds us accountable. In the text, the guilty are punished to the third and fourth generation, BUT that is not the emphasis--the mercy of God, the love of God, in Hebrew, the *hesed* of God, extends to what? The sixth and seventh generation? No! To the thousandth generation! Now that is something you can bank on! God's love is persistent. It goes the distance. It NEVER fails!

Again, the scope of this awesome word in the biblical text is beyond what we can explore today, but I want to lift up two themes of this word that tower above all others. The first is God's 'unfailing presence.' When Jesus ascends to heaven after the resurrection appearances, he tells his disciples, "Surely, I will be with you always to the end of the age." (Mt 28:20) That is of great comfort to them, but it is simply a restatement of a promise made centuries earlier to Israel. We know it in its "I will never leave you or forsake you" pattern (Dt 31:6) God's character is such that those who trust God will never be deserted. God is guardian of our wellbeing, and the knowledge that God is 'on the job' gives us the security to go about the business of living.

When my oldest son was little, we moved him from our room to his own room. He had lots of toys there, including a Little Tykes slide. One day he was in the living room with us looking at a book when all of the sudden, he jumped up and shouted, "Slide! Slide!" meaning he wanted to play on the slide in his room. We encouraged him to play on the slide by himself, while we finished what we were doing. He accepted our suggestion, but he returned again and again just to make sure we were still around. As soon as he saw us, he felt secure enough to go back and continue playing with his slide.

There were, however, other times when he felt less secure, less confident. We went to a village store on the Fourth of July when he was 2 and were surprised by a series of exploding fireworks. Stephen Eric was petrified and buried himself in my chest, while I did my best to reassure him. If that is how it is between an earthly father and his son, how much more will we be reassured by God's unfailing presence? God promises to be with us in the best of moments and in the darkest of moments.

That brings us to the second quality of God's unfailing love: unfailing redemption. Quite honestly, some of the worst moments of my life were provoked by horribly poor decisions and sins committed. If God was fundamentally about retribution, I would have sunk with the Titanic. But God's unfailing love translates into unfailing redemption. Even in the Exodus text we see this, because God gives this assurance right after the people of God had committed gross idolatry. God forgives. Why? Because it is God's nature to do so! And it is not a single moment of forgiveness either, it is persistent forgiveness and persistent redemption.

The Hebrew Seder, the ancestor of our communion celebration, includes a song, "Dai, Dai, Ye-nu," which celebrates God's unfailing redemption by naming all of the miracles that God accomplished to bring them into freedom. Miracle on top of miracle on top of miracle! One might say, "It would have been enough if God had delivered us from the waters of the Sea of Reeds, but he also gave us quail and manna to eat! Dai, da-ye-nu, Dai, , da-ye-nu, Dai, da-ye-nu, da-ye-nu, da-ye-nu!"

No matter what happens, when all else fails, God will be there to pick up the pieces. I saw this in my own life in the days and months following 9-11. At the time, my marriage of 17 years had come to an end, and not by my choice. I was devastated, separated from my family and dangerously alone. But God was with me, day by day, and I was blessed to have an incredibly supportive church family. I got through it, with prayer and support, and just when I finally accepted the new reality as my lot, God restored my marriage, my family, and my sense of emotional balance—unfailing love, unfailing redemption, unfailing Easter!

That brings us to the Communion table. Communion proclaims the Gospel. In it, we remember the deliverance of God's people from slavery in Egypt. In it, we recognize our deliverance from sin through the self-offering of Jesus, God's unfailing love in action. But there is something more. In communion, we embrace the God who wants to be known by us and who loves us more than anyone else ever could. Unfailing presence. Unfailing redemption. Unfailing love. But know this—this kind of sacramental moment, when the divine heart and human heart touch, changes a person to the core of the soul. Priorities change—and we begin to live for God and not just for ourselves.

There was a man who repeatedly visited his rabbi because he felt distant from God and wanted to feel God's presence. One day, the rabbi felt it was time to challenge him. He said, "Do you see that door on the other side of my office? If you go over and open that door, you will meet God face to face." The man looked at the rabbi with great concern—and then decided to exit the office by the door he entered rather than face God.

As your pastor, when I invite you to receive communion, I am pointing to a door, on the other side of which, God is waiting, eager to embrace you—to heal your hurts, to forgive your sin, to redeem your broken dreams and to resurrect your Easter expectations. It is not a question of whether or not God is present, but a question of whether or not you are.