

“The God We Know”
Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17
A sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA
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A number of years ago, I took a youth group from another church on a mission trip to Costa Rica. We went not to the beaches or rainforests you see in the tourist brochures, but to a small village up near the border with Nicaragua. The children there had outgrown their school building; they needed additional classrooms. We brought money to purchase supplies, then worked alongside the people of that village to mix the cement and hammer the nails and paint the walls.

It was even before I got tired of my cold shower and bug-infested mattress and aching back that I got cranky. The *youth* would call it cranky. I prefer to call it “honest.” Something had been bothering me for months, and I could ignore it no longer: it was the way the youth read Scripture when we gathered for worship or study – how they did so without reverence. The kids in that group would ham up the parts when they read them, or they’d talk amongst themselves as the Scriptures were read, or they’d roll their eyes at the parts they found ridiculous. Well, I thought this had gotten out of hand.

So the second night of our trip, before we began our devotions, I sat the group down and gave them a speech – an *honest* and thoughtful speech. I said, “Now, I know that you find some parts of the Bible funny or crazy or hard to believe. I’m not asking you to stifle your responses or accept everything without question. But the Scriptures are holy!” I said. “We meet God in them!” I remember how I felt myself gathering steam, could hear the saints cheering me on. I said, “When Moses encountered God in the burning bush, he took his shoes off right away. When Isaiah saw the holiness of the Lord, he was stunned by it; he cried, ‘Woe is me!’ When you and I read the Scriptures, we encounter something much bigger than we are – a force to be reckoned with. God commands our respect,” I said. “I expect you to treat the Scriptures with respect.”

I settled back in my chair, feeling satisfied, and Allen, who would have been president of the youth group, if we’d had a president, sat up in his. I was surprised. Allen and I were friends; often he would give me his support, but now he seemed . . . well, *cranky*. With conviction in his voice Allen said, “That’s not the God *I* know. All my life, all these years in church, I’ve heard about a God who is patient and loving – like a friend or a father to us. God isn’t so big and scary – not the God *I* know.”

I recalled that exchange recently as I read some of Kathleen Norris’ reflections on “God Talk.” She suggests that too often (and despite our best intentions) our conceptions of God – like our language for God – can become a kind of idolatry, a way of making God small and manageable, safely confined to our comfort zones. So often, she says, one “hears people say, ‘I just can’t handle it,’ when they reject a biblical image of God as Father, as Mother, as Lord or Judge; God as lover, as angry or jealous, God on a cross. I find this choice of words revealing, [Norris says, no matter how real the pain they

reflect]: if we seek a God we can “handle,” that will be exactly what we get. A God we can manipulate, suspiciously like ourselves, the wideness of whose mercy [we also have] cut down to size.”¹

It is characteristic of the Reformed tradition – our Christian tradition – to resist narrow thinking about God. We affirm instead the majesty of God, the freedom of God, the mystery of a God who is at once a force to be reckoned with and, at the same time, like a parent or a friend to us. We believe God transcends the world we know and cannot be reduced to anything in it.

Fred Craddock, who retired some years ago from teaching preaching at Emory, and whose sermons are known to many of you, used to tell a story about this kind of open and expansive thinking, which he learned at an early age. One summer night when he was a child his father took him out into the backyard.

They lay there side-by-side in the grass, looking up at the stars. After a long while his father asked, “Son, how far can you think?”

Fred asked what he meant, and his father said, “Just think as far as you can think up toward the stars.” “I screwed my imagination up,” said Fred, “and I said, ‘I’m thinking as far as I can think.’”

And his father said, “Well, drive down a stake out there now. In your mind, drive down a stake. Have you driven down the stake? That’s how far you can think?” And Fred responded, “Yes, sir.” His father asked, “Now, what’s on the other side of your stake?” “Well,” said Fred, “there’s more sky.” His father said, “Then you’d better move your stake.”

Fred said they spent the whole evening out there moving his stake. It was, he said, a crazy thing to do, but that he could never thank his father enough for doing it, because it introduced him to the whole concept of mystery and awe and the limitations of the human mind. Life is not so easily defined and fixed and settled and categorized as we often like to think.²

Nor is God.

This Sunday after Pentecost is called Trinity Sunday – it’s the day we affirm the triune nature of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That nature, I think, is one of the surest indications we have that God is well beyond any stake we can plant. Philip Yancey says “It took the brightest minds of the early church almost five centuries to come up with lasting formulations to express the concept of the Trinity.”³ Note the plural

¹ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books, NY, 1998) 214.

² Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis, Chalice Press, 2001).

³ Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God* (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000). 126.

of “formulations.” No single conception will do. “In the unseen world, no confusion exists about how three persons can be one God.” But on our side of the curtain, it’s a puzzle that continues to confound.

The word “person” is but a stab at the truth. Theologians of the early church borrowed that term from the theater. The word *persona* in Latin, *prosopon* in Greek, referred to the mask that actors wore on stage. “One God, three *persona*” was how those theologians chose to illustrate the way a single Being could be expressed in different ways.⁴ The ancient theologian Tertullian wrote of another image, a lovely one. He imagined the Trinity “as a plant, with the Father as a deep root, the Son as the shoot that breaks forth into the world, the Spirit as that which spreads beauty and fragrance” and makes the earth able to produce flowers and fruit.⁵ Years later Catherine of Siena spoke about God’s provision in the Supper we’ll share today. She said God is our Table, Food, and Server.

More recently, Dorothy Sayers suggested we understand God best when we think of God as a creative artist, engaged in the act of creation from the seed of an *idea to its expression and to recognition*. To unpack that a little, Sayers says that God the Creator is the Idea, or Essence, of all that is. “I am that I am,” God said to Moses. “I will be what I will be.” God is the Essence from which all things emerge. Christ our Redeemer is the perfect expression of the Essence of God. This we also believe. Christ is the image of the invisible God, Paul said, and to see what God is like we look to Jesus, who represents God exactly. But God’s creative revelation did not come to fruition until Pentecost. When the Spirit came, God took up residence in human beings. Something of God’s Essence now lives inside each of us, helping us to recognize our new identity:⁶ “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”⁷

Here at the beginning of Ordinary Time, and as we move through it this summer and fall, we have a chance to reflect upon the fundamental story of our faith – what we’ve heard from Advent with its first announcement of the Christ, through Epiphany and Lent and Easter, to Pentecost, when God’s Spirit came. We have a chance to think about the many and various ways God has revealed God’s own self to us, to think as far as we can think about the nature of God who is mysterious and grand and unapproachable, but also closer to us than breathing, nearer than hands and feet⁸ – the God who lit the world, the God who saved the world, the God who moves now among us. We have the chance to recognize God’s image within each of us, to claim our inheritance, to rise in response to God’s call, to move out of our comfort zones.

Now is a good time to start, and here is a great place to begin. This week as I was reading the names and written reflections of the men and women nominated for office in

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Norris, 291.

⁶ Yancey, 125.

⁷ Romans 8:15-16.

⁸ Alfred Lord Tennyson, “The Higher Pantheism.”

this church, I was impressed (as I am often impressed) by the diversity of members here – and by our members’ appreciation of this church’s diversity, reflected in everything from theological perspective to cultural heritage to sexual orientation to age to educational background. In a community like this one, Kathleen Norris’ observation about the Trinity becomes especially meaningful. She says, “For Christians, the Trinity is the primary symbol of a community that holds together by containing diversity within itself.”⁹ One body, with different perspectives. Unity that is not uniform. When we can own our differences and still hold together, we are more like God, who does the same.

It’s not about the God I know, nor the God you know, not in the end. It’s about the God *we* know when we’re together. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now we know only in part; then we will know fully, even as we have been fully known. Until then, let us look together toward the heavens and think as far as we can, as bravely as we can, with faith in the one who cannot “be handled,” but who handles us – with gentleness, with forbearance, and with love.

⁹ Norris, 289.