

Who is God and Who Are We?

God has been getting an awful lot of bad press these days.

The sadistic, misguided horrors of the Islamic State people, who only last week beheaded scores of Coptic Christians just because they were Christian; and all done, supposedly in the name of God, seems to lead the list this week.

And of course there was the furor President Obama's remarks caused at the National Prayer Breakfast just a couple of weeks ago.

He too commented on the horrors in the Middle East, but also cautioned that we not feel superior, because so many similar atrocities have also been committed in the name of the Christian God.

Some folks went nuts over those comments, apparently forgetting not only the Crusades, but the centuries of slavery followed by Jim Crow segregation and the thousands of lynchings all carried out with a rope in one hand and a Bible in the other.

All of this feeds those Militant Atheists - men like Sam Harris and the comedian Bill Maher, who insist that religious faith, rather than being the salvation of humanity, is its biggest curse.

Harris and those in his camp create a cartoon straw man out of religion, and then delight in tearing it down.

And yet, here comes Jesus, having faced so many demons in the desert; here comes Jesus, inviting us to turn around, to embrace the good news about God.

What are we to make of all this?

What response do we have as people of faith?

What does God really look like?

Is our faith something that moves this world forward or does it drag us back into barbarity?

Noah gives us a clue.

It's with him that God makes his first covenant with us.

Now, if you haven't been to law school, you may not know the difference between a covenant and a contract.

A contract is made between two parties, and each has obligations, and if one side fails to perform, the other side is justified in terminating her obligations.

But a covenant is a one-sided deal.

A covenant is all promise and performance by one side — by God — no matter how often or how egregiously, we fail to perform.

Years after Noah, God makes another covenant, this time with Abraham.

As was the tradition in those days, a bull is sacrificed and cut in half.

The parties to the agreement then walk in between the severed animal pieces, as if to say: "If I welch on my promise, may I end up cut in half just like this bull."

When God makes his covenant with Abraham, only God passes between the bull halves, Abraham, you see, with the blessing of God, is fast asleep.

These one-sided deals continue with Moses and the freed slaves of Egypt.

God keeps making promises, and keeps his promises, no matter our failures and refusals.

Even when they worship a golden calf, even when they join NATO instead of trusting God, even when they treat their iPhones as God Almighty.

God never quits on us.

Never.

Which, if you can wrap your head around that, gives us a picture of God that is so at odds with how so many understand God: we seem determined to want a God of vengeance and justice and punishment and retribution, not for ourselves naturally, but for that guy, for those groups, for this or that bunch of evil doers!

And yet as we read through scripture, we see that the true face of God longs for every one of us, even the ISIS murderers, even the Klansmen, and as I have mentioned once or twice before, even Donald Trump!

We know that's true because God sends the prophet Hosea out to marry a prostitute, as a sign that God is faithful even in the face of unimaginable faithlessness.

It is true in the parables of the lousy son who blows his wad, only to come home, not because he's sorry, but because he's hungry, and here comes the father, racing for him with arms opened wide.

This is the news that Jesus, God in the flesh, brings to the whole world.

He comes to once and for all announce the good news about who and what God is actually all about.

What is this good news?

It is that God is not in the revenge and purity and cleansing business.

Here's how James Carroll puts it:

"Humans are forever ... imagining their doom, only because, in strict justice, they deserve it.

Justice is an essential element of the divine, ..., otherwise we would be too easily reconciled to the human capacity for betrayal and atrocity.

But justice is not the whole story, or even the main one.

What humans cannot imagine is that, to the merciful God, just deserts are not the point.

God is the father forever prepared to rush out in greeting, with the fatted calf prepared for the feast.

It is not God's mind that needs to be changed, ..., but the self-condemning human being's.

Salvation, Jesus says, is the recognition of **this God** as the **only God**." J. Carroll, *Christ Actually*, 133.

And so it is that God shows herself not in power and the sword, but as a young minister, rushing out onto the street, trying to tie his shoes and button his shirt as he races after a neighbor he's only known for a few weeks,....a neighbor who just received a terminal diagnosis at 38 years of age — and as he catches up with him, breathless, not knowing what to say, but trying anyway, he puts hand to heart and gazes in the condemned man's eyes.....hoping that unspeakable news may be comforted with words that cannot be spoken. C. Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 69.

That God shows himself in the sharing of food and sidewalk space that dear Rev. Lorenza told us about last week, her encounters with God as she lives houseless on streets around the world for going on 4 years now.....

God shows himself in the witness of young Kayla Mueller, who says before dying in Syria:

"This really is my life's work, to go where there is suffering.

I suppose, like us all, I'm learning how to deal with the suffering of the world inside myself... to deal with my own pain and most importantly to still have the ability to be proactive.

"The gardener knows how to turn garbage into compost.

Therefore our anger, sadness, and fear is the best compost for our compassion.

"I've learned that selflessness is a practice, not a place; a journey much more than a destination."

And God shows himself in that marvelous young man, who healed so many, gave hope to so many, only to be grabbed by the leaders of the day, tried in a kangaroo court, and then,, why, they nailed that nice young man to a tree, until he died.

Whether it is cancer or homelessness or suffering or fear, all of it comes to rest there, at the cross.

The cross.

That eternal symbol of God's complete absence, and of God's utter presence, all at this one holy, desolate, intersection.

But neither cancer nor homelessness nor suffering nor fear have the last word.

This time, when that young man was nailed to the tree to his death, the finger of God reaches into his grave, touches him, just as you will one day be touched, and raises that nice young man to life that will never again end, a life we were always intended to live, a life in the nearer presence of this God who died so that we might live.

It's not we who define God, which is something fundamentalists of every persuasion seem to forget, it is God who defines us: and this is the good news, that God's plan for all of us is to be like God.

This is our hope.

This is our destiny.

Thanks be to God!

+amen

