

## ***What Does God Look Like?***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
October 20, 2019  
Text: Isaiah 6:1-8

So, when you heard this text read this morning, what were you envisioning in your mind's eye? What pictures formed in your brain as you heard Isaiah's phenomenal description of his visionary encounter with the living God enthroned in the Temple? What sticks out for you most vividly from Isaiah's moment standing in the presence of God? (*pause for responses*) How would you answer the question of "what does God look like?" Does Isaiah's description of God have any commonality with how you imagine God to be? In what ways? (*pause for responses*)

We're left to wonder from Isaiah's details on this incredible encounter with God as to what exactly is happening. Is it a vision? Or something more than that? The text isn't clear. It just begins with Isaiah saying, "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting on a throne..." At least part of the experience, King Uzziah's death, is grounded in the real world in a verifiable historical event. Is that meant to encourage us to believe Isaiah actually visited the heavenly court where he saw the living God seated on the throne? Hard to say and I'm not sure it matters. What matters to Isaiah in this story is that we, his readers, try to comprehend, to fully grasp, the unfathomable, the incredible

awesomeness of God. God was so huge just the hem of his robe filled the temple. Just the hem! Even I know enough about sewing to know that if just the hem filled an entire gigantic room, then the wearer of the robe had to be of a size impossible to comprehend. And that was precisely Isaiah's point. And what about the seraphs, those celestial beings whose sole job was to attend God, constantly chanting "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

The seraphs are my favorite part of this story. Look at how Isaiah describes these beings. He focuses on the fact that they have six wings: with two they covered their faces; with two they covered their feet (which probably means their private parts) and with the remaining two they flew, constantly hovering around this holy being we know as God. Notice that Isaiah doesn't say specifically that they are human in form. This is the only text in the bible where the seraphim are mentioned, so there are no other descriptions of them elsewhere to help us know what kind of beings they were. Angels of some sort, most likely. Seraph is a derivative of a Hebrew word used to describe fiery serpents the Israelites encountered during their years in the desert but are these seraphim some sort of burning, flying snakes? Isaiah doesn't make that clear. We do know that the noise they made with their constant chanting shook the thresholds of the room in which Isaiah found himself. No wonder he said, "woe is me!"

Then the most extraordinary thing happened. One of the seraphs took a live coal from the altar and brought it to Isaiah, touching his lips with it thereby purifying him. The seraph told him, “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” This is the whole point of Isaiah’s encounter with God. This is why when God then asked the seemingly open-ended question, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Isaiah immediately responded, “Here am I; send me!” Here am I, send me! It’s easy to see why this particular text is a popular one for ordinations. It’s an incredible story of what it feels like to recognize, sometimes kicking and screaming, that one has a call from God to do something in particular that God needs done. It’s most easy for us to think of that as someone like myself responding to a call to ministry, but a call from God does not have to be a call to serve God in the church. The truth is we can be called to serve God in many ways over the course of a lifetime. A call from God can be something as simple as the knowledge that being the best parent you can be to your child is the most important and fulfilling thing you can do. Or, it can be accepting and acting on a gift for teaching or engineering or gardening or writing or creating beautiful art or just being a really good friend.

The truth is, God’s call to us comes in many forms and it evolves over a lifetime as we change. God is not static. God is dynamic, always changing, always on the move – a God active in

history and the lives of God's people. This is the key testimony of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Gospels and Epistles. God lives! God cares! God intervenes! God touches lives and changes them. And that, dear friends, is every bit as scary to comprehend as those multi-winged, chanting, fiery angels Isaiah encountered when he had this incredible vision of God.

That's why it matters that we stop to consider how it is that we picture, imagine, God to be. "What does God look like" is a legitimate question to ask. Certainly, artists over the millennia have asked that question, and come up with their own answers. One of the most famous has to be Michelangelo's painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. I think this magnificent painting influences how we think of God more than we realize, even if we are not art connoisseurs. Think about it. Most people when they try to imagine God, find themselves visualizing an old man (white) sitting on a throne with long white hair and a long white beard. Sort of scary, judgmental looking, regal... Sound familiar? This text from Isaiah is at least part of the reason this image of God is such a popular one. But, is it accurate? I doubt it. It's too obvious and, in my experience, God is never, ever obvious. God wants us to have to work at our encounters with the divine. An old white man on a throne ready to order people around is too small an image of this all-powerful God who acts in history.

So, how else might we envision God? Or, are we even supposed to figure out something so mundane as what God looks like? Are we breaking a commandment by doing so? After all, doesn't the 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment tell us God forbids any images of God's self to be created? Well, yes and no. It actually says you cannot create an image for the purpose of worshiping it as though it was God. But, still, we're treading on thin ice when the pursuit to know what the divine being of the universe looks like surpasses our willingness to act on the knowledge of God's presence in our lives. Our relationship with God, then, is not based on God's physical reality, on knowing what God looks like. Our relationship with God is about listening for God's still, small voice in our minds and hearts, and finding the courage to respond.

This inability to know absolutely what God looks like, that God is, lies at the bottom why folks have so much difficulty making the leap of faith. No one has seen God, not like Isaiah's vision anyway. No one has touched God, like we experience the physical touch of others we love. Many have claimed to have heard God, and even interacted with God or Jesus or the Virgin Mary. But, to the non-believer this just sounds like so much nonsense. And to the believer it makes nothing but sense. Where does this leave the rest of us? Searching for answers and that's a good thing. God loves our questions as much as God loves us. God, to me, is that ever patient, always loving parent who only

smiles in response to our constant toddler-like questioning of ceaseless “why’s?” Our questions, our doubts, our anger, even our sin is a part of who God created us to be and God loves all of it. That love is as incomprehensible to us as Isaiah’s described encounter with this throne room of the all encompassing Divine Presence we call God.

Yet, we must acknowledge that Isaiah’s description of God is intended to evoke a sense of the incredible, indefinable presence of God that is so immense, so beyond the ability of a mere mortal to understand, that it is down right terrifying. And yet, when Isaiah hears God ask who will go for him, Isaiah doesn’t hesitate. He shouts – “Here am I! Send me!” Now that just doesn’t make sense. Isaiah says yes to the divine presence whose whole being is terrifying. What’s up with that? Well, for one thing, this dramatic story is intended to prove that Isaiah is indeed a prophet. He is uniquely special in his relationship with God and therefore uniquely qualified to speak for God to the people.

But what of the rest of us who are not prophets, who do not consider ourselves to be anyone special within God’s plans for the world? What does God look like to us when we dare to imagine that God needs us to answer God’s question, “whom can I send?” I would suggest that what God looks like doesn’t matter in that moment. What does matter is how you answer the question. And to answer the question you first have to admit it’s been asked.

You have to be willing to consider the possibility that God has indeed asked you – YOU – to do something. Now what am I saying here? That God will call you by name and then provide specific instructions for what God needs you to do? No. It's never that simple. God seldom shouts instructions or directions. God prefers to nudge, whisper, mumble, and guide.

Think of it this way. God places a thought in your head that goes something like, "you know, I wonder what's up with my friend so-and-so. Maybe I should give him a call." And then you call and five minutes into the conversation your friend is saying, "how did you know I needed to talk with someone today?" That, dear friends, is God sending you out when God needed your help, even if you never said, "here am I, send me." That's because God knows your heart better than you do. God will guide your every footstep if only you will allow God in to your life enough to do so.

The picture of God Isaiah paints for us is an incredible one: An immense presence too awesome, too incredible to comprehend surrounded by weird angelic beings chanting so loud the building shakes. But is this the God we envision when we dare to believe that God loves us, that God cares about what happens to us, that God has blessed us with the gifts we need to live the lives God intends for us? Maybe. But in the end, it really doesn't matter what God looks like. It only matters that God is. Amen.