



LESSONS IN LIVING

“Images of God”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Rev. Erica Knisely
September 27, 2026

Scripture Reading: Psalms 23 (*The Inclusive Bible*)
YHWH, you are my shepherd—I want nothing more.
You let me lie down in green meadows;
you lead me beside restful waters:
you refresh my soul.
You guide me to lush pastures
for the sake of your Name.
Even if I'm surrounded by shadows of Death,
I fear no danger, for you are with me.
Your rod and your staff—they give me courage.
You spread a table for me in the presence of my enemies,
and you anoint my head with oil—my cup overflows!
Only goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in your house, YHWH*, for days without end.*

** YHWH represents the divine name found in the Hebrew text. It represents the Divine Mystery and, traditionally, is not pronounced. Instead, we say “God” or some other term of reverence.*

Sermon

The question perplexed me. I didn't know what she was looking for when she asked us, “Who is your Jesus?” (she raises a tentative hand - What??!)

Was she asking – what do I know or think I know about Jesus? What have I read? Are we talking about the historical Jesus?

Who is *my* Jesus?

Then she clarified. She said: “My Jesus is Cuban and dances salsa.” *[laughter]*

Which didn't really clear it up for me. But I knew immediately that I wanted to know this woman. That was the beginning of my very dear friendship with Magda. And I have never forgotten her question.

Who is *your* Jesus? Who or what is God to you?

Among us, we have a variety of ways of naming God - or not: higher power, Light, Love that is both within and beyond all, ultimate reality, organizing principle of the universe, ground of our being, Christ.

The Franciscan, Richard Rohr, puts it simply:

"The word 'God' is, first of all, a stand-in for everything — reality, truth, and the very shape of your universe."

What shape does that take in your mind? Do you have an image of God – some mental representation of this vast and indescribable reality?

In church, you often hear us talk about the image of God within us – the *imago dei* – Then let us make humankind in our likeness. Today I want to think together about the images we have of God. As Richard Rohr says,

Your image of God creates you. . . There is an absolute connection between how you see God and how you see yourself and the whole universe. . . What you see is what you are.

What images do you carry around within you? Many of us are given images of God when we are young – some of those loving, some of those harsh or indifferent. I think many of those images reside in a place just beneath our conscious awareness.

Have you had the experience – when something very painful happens – perhaps an illness or loss of job or loved one — of feeling like you are being punished? Or feeling cursed? That's a fairly common reaction. Where does that come from? I think many of us have internalized an image of God as punisher (she holds up a fist) and judge whether we are aware of it or not.

I think many of us have also internalized an image of God as wish fulfiller in the sky – like Santa Claus with different clothes. I see that as a reflection of our consumer culture driving us on a never-ending quest to fulfill all our desires. As though we can achieve the good life through material possessions.

How do the images we hold about ultimate reality shape us and shape our world?

I think it's a fundamental truth that no image, no mental representation can correspond to God – to being, itself.

But as human beings it's very normal for us to create images – whether through art or imagination – images mediate that which feels too vast. Without images to describe that more

than we can ever imagine – it's like we are grasping at smoke. We need something tangible to hold onto. To help us comprehend and connect. That's just being human.

That, to me, is what is so profound about Jesus – not just his teachings, but this idea of Jesus as the divine incarnate – the infinite born into the finite. Something, someone we can hold onto as we grasp and seek Ultimate Love, the Light from which all light comes. A personal connection that tethers us to infinity.

There are many different names and images of God in scripture. One of my favorites is from Psalm 23 – it's a verse I committed to memory of my own volition at a young age. It's one I have used often in hospice work.

God is my shepherd – I shall not want. God makes me to lie down in green pastures, leads me beside still waters, prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies, my cup overflows. God of care, beauty, abundance, peace. This is an image of God that I cherish. It's from the Jewish scriptures. Christians also associate it with Jesus.

Who or what is God to you? What images do you hold in mind and heart? How do those images shape you?

Our images of God can be helpful – comforting, encouraging. They can shape us in beautiful and good ways; Our images of God can also be problematic and shape us and the world around us in harmful and terrible ways.

I want to offer a few examples of that this morning.

I had a roommate once – I didn't know her very well before we moved in. She was and is a kind person. Something that I noticed after a while was that she had a way of dividing her world into two very distinct categories– what is sacred and what is secular. Sacred music. Secular music. Christian friends. Secular friends. Sacred thoughts. Secular thoughts. She had constructed a rigid boundary in her mind.

I even tried that way of viewing the world on myself for a little while – it was life-draining and lacking in grace. As I've reflected on her through the years, I've wondered – what was her image of God? It seems like God, for her, was often like a parent who could never be satisfied and was always ready to judge her for any misstep. So, she worked really hard to stay within the lines. She was motivated, I think, by wanting to be good and loving – to focus her mind and heart on good and beautiful and true things.

But, that was such an exhausting way to live. I think there was a lot of goodness and beauty and truth that she missed.

Richard Rohr, calling upon the spirituality of Francis of Assisi, says that

The finite manifests the infinite, and the physical is the doorway to the spiritual. . . There are not sacred and profane things, places, and moments. There are only sacred and

desecrated things, places, and moments — and it is we alone who desecrate them by our blindness and lack of reverence. It is one sacred universe, and we are all a part of it. . .

There are only sacred and desecrated things, places, people, moments – and it is we alone who desecrate them.

A week ago today, a federal immigration agent shot Wilbur Rafael Garces Perez in the back of the neck at the intersection of Anderson Square and 183, here in Austin. I've been there hundreds of times. He makes money through Door Dash delivery to pay for medical bills for his son who has a disability. He came here legally seeking asylum – missed an immigration hearing when a notice went to an old address – and had an order for deportation. That's his story. Not a threat. Not a criminal. A dad. A husband. A son. A neighbor.

Yet ICE drove after him aggressively...and they shot him in the back.

What images of God must those ICE agents be carrying within them?

To shoot a man in the back? To remove him from a hospital with a bullet in his neck and make him sleep on a cold, hard floor with no medical care or pain medication? What image of God – allows them to treat him with such disregard? To be so cruel to their brother? To see him as less human than they are? To desecrate what is sacred in such a way?

I am not in their minds and hearts – I don't know precisely how they think about why we are all here – and what is true and good and right. I don't know.

But I am certain that we have all been influenced by an image of God that was brought to this continent by European colonists. My ancestors among them. An image of a light-skinned, fair-eyed Jesus. A Jesus stripped of his Jewish heritage. A Jesus that conformed to the Western ideals of culture and appearance. And behind those images of Jesus a European conqueror God. An image of God wedded to power that shaped people and shaped the world in profound ways. An image that justified enslaving Africans and killing and conquering indigenous people in order to “save them” and take their land.

We just cannot seem to purge ourselves of this image of God that keeps killing so many people. God save us from the ways we desecrate one another.

There are many ways people imagine God – different images we carry. And they aren't all bad – but we need to ask – where do these representations of God lead us – to Life? Or to Death?

It seems to me that the biggest problem comes when we mistake our particular image of God for God altogether. Remember the quotation,

God is, first of all, a stand-in for everything — reality, truth, and the very shape of your universe.

No image or series of images could possibly contain everything. Yet people mistake their image of God for God. They become rigid in their understanding of God – and try to make God small – try to make God conform to their understanding.

Some years ago, a couple of women I'm close to invited me to come listen to the new minister at their church — they loved his preaching. And so I went and listened. And here's where St. Andrew's kind of ruins you for other places. *[laughter]* For very good reasons, we don't use gendered language for God – and so if you've been here awhile and you go somewhere else, you know that the contrast can be stark.

And so I listened. But his preaching was so full of *Father*, and *Lord*, and *He*, and *Him* for God, that I had a hard time hearing the rest of his message.

After church, we had lunch and they were eager to hear what I thought. I didn't want to disappoint them, so as best and as gently as I could I said, "Yeah, he's a good speaker, but honestly I was very distracted by how much he used male pronouns when referring to God."

Right away, one of them reacted with a hint of anger and defensiveness in her voice and said, "But, God is a male."

I could tell it wasn't a time to press the issue, *[laughter]* or get into theological arguments. Even though I was trying to be gentle, I hit a nerve. What I said was likely threatening on some level. And I have a lot of compassion for that.

Yes, Jesus was male. And according to my beliefs, an incarnation of the divine, of God. And, yet that doesn't make God — the ground of our being, Light from which all light comes, male. That's too reductive. That's us trying to put the indescribable, ineffable, transcendent, being itself in a box.

Why do people get so offended by female images of God? And where do exclusively male images for the divine lead us? Just look at online culture and the ways in which women are demeaned and humiliated on a daily basis by content creators.

And I say all this as someone who finds male imagery for God comforting and dear. When I imagine God, I don't imagine a face....more often I sense God's hand on my shoulder. Especially when I am up here preaching – it's a hand that steadies me: I'm with you, I've got you. It's a hand that reminds of my dad's hand.

Yet that's not the only way that I imagine the infinite God. Not only do I connect with a shepherd, a hand on my shoulder....but when I experience suffering, I imagine God weeping, or when I hear of the terrible ways children are harmed or women are exploited, I imagine God as lightning and fire, when I feel the spark of creativity, I see God pregnant and growing life.

Because God is infinite, I think we are allowed some creativity. There may be a particular image or idea that helps you connect with the divine at particular times. Different cultures and different eras have imagined God in their own idioms. A Cuban Jesus who dances salsa. I like that!

In early Christian art, Jesus as a shepherd was a popular motif and was wedded with aspects of Greek mythology - the Greek God, Hermes.

Again, with any image, with any symbol, we need to ask ourselves – does this lead to life, does this lead us toward what Christ teaches us about love – or does it drain our life, does it lead us away from love? Does it lead us to harm our neighbors?

One of the greatest dangers lies in thinking God *is* the image that we have created – when we replace God with our image of God. A fair-skinned Jesus. A male God. A punishing parent.

For thousands of years, we've been warned about this danger. I think there's a commandment about that somewhere.

John Calvin, one of the Protestant Reformers, believed that God was so beyond human comprehension that images distorted and deformed our understanding of God. His contemporary, Martin Luther, urged people not to put their trust in self-invented notions of the divine.

Our Muslim siblings don't make any images of God – because to represent God is an impossibility.

Our orthodox Christian siblings don't believe in making representations of the invisible, transcendent God either. But, they do create icons of Jesus and ancestors in the faith – people who lived and walked on the earth. They meditate on them as windows into the divine.

I take a moderate view. I think it's very normal for humans to create mental representations of this larger reality that we're trying to comprehend and connect with. They help us feel a personal connection so we're not just grasping at smoke.

At the same time, I think we can reach a point where we don't need a particular image – or a human image. Where we can feel that connection like the air that we breathe.

Wherever you are in your thinking about this, I believe it's good to take some time to examine what images of God you carry, what images you have internalized without even realizing it. How do those images create you and shape the world around you?

It can be unsettling to confront the ways that our images of God are not God – but this I know to be true: God's love is big enough to contain all our questions, all our wonderings, all of us. One Sacred Universe.

Benediction

Rev. Babs Miller

No matter what your image of God, or Spirit, or whatever one might call that which seems to be all around us, I would remind all of you that each of you is a child of that wonderful Spirit of Love that we sometimes call God. And that Spirit knows when you skin your knee or your heart. That Spirit knows when you admire a butterfly or cry in the darkness. So go out into this wonderful creation and tell the whole world that they are loved just exactly as they are. Go and kiss the hurts of this world. Go and laugh and play in the fields of grace and love. Go in peace. Amen.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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