

Commandments II: In the Image of God

August 21, 2022

Exodus 20:4-6

Exodus 32

If I asked you to describe what God looks like, what would you say? Does He have long hair or short hair? What color is that hair? Is He young or old? What color is His skin? Is He really even a “He”? In preparing for this sermon this past week, I went on Google and typed “God” in the search bar, clicked on the “images” tab, and lo and behold, there were millions of images of God available. From the ones I saw, roughly half were pictures of the Anglicized Jesus we all grew up knowing; brown hair, blue eyes, white skin, you know the one. The other half were of a well-dressed, old, White man with a bushy beard and body builder’s physique. Ironically, I did come across a couple pictures of Donald Trump on that search page, but we won’t open that can of worms, now or ever. Regardless, I ask these questions to you all not because I expect you all to answer these questions or because I want to test you to see whether you have the right image of God in mind, but rather to make a different point. If we answered even one of these questions with anything other than “God is beyond such things,” we are guilty of the same “great sin” the Israelites committed in Exodus 32.

Granted, we have not made an idol of any sort that we worship God through, but can we really blame them for faltering? They were born and raised in a land where the gods and goddesses had their own pantheon, each had their own power/function, each had statues and images, and each had a temple where you could pray directly to if not have a priest intercede on your behalf to these deities. Now, here they are in the middle of the wilderness. This God that has brought them out of Egypt and freed them is invisible and intangible. He has no temple in which to worship Him besides a mountain that only Moses is allowed to ascend. Unlike the gods of Egyptian mythology, this God does everything, which to us sounds simpler and easier. However, this God of Jacob and Abraham is the opposite of these gods in every way. Worshipping God would have been foreign and uncomfortable to them, at least to start. So, they married the two practices and made an idol: a golden calf cast from the jewelry they all were wearing.

This golden calf does everything they want it to do. It makes God more accessible by creating a physical place where they can directly pray to, honor, and worship this God. It removes some of the mystery of this strange God that apparently knows them but they know very little (if anything) about. It makes this God more real by having something physical, something visible and tangible to represent this God that demands their worship. However, what they didn’t consider was that, by making this idol in the image of God, they are now worshipping this idol and everything it represents to them rather than the God it was initially made to represent. The calf receives the worship, praise, and honor; not God. Understandably, this makes God very angry, and rightfully so. God commanded them not 12 chapters earlier not to do this, and they’ve already done the exact opposite. Then again, we’re no better.

Consider the image we have made of God. Our God is portrayed as a man, and so much do we believe in this image that we refuse to use any other pronouns in reference to God besides male pronouns. However, God is not male. That is to say that God does not have a physical form like you and me, and therefore, They cannot be characterized as one sex or the other based on anatomy. Similarly, we cannot classify Them one way or the other based on personality, because God exhibits both stereotypically male and female personality traits throughout the

Bible, whether that's the loving forgiveness and the giving birth to our world that would be attributed to a woman or the wrathful anger and power often attributed to men. Also, though, God is portrayed as White, a representation of Their power and authority among all races in the creator's eyes. However, even if God did have a physical form like you and me, They are the only one of Their kind and therefore would be another race entirely. Thirdly, we portray God as old as a sign of Their knowledge and wisdom, as a sign of the authority and respect They so deserve. However, God exists beyond time and space. The Bible clearly states that God is ageless ("from everlasting to everlasting") and changeless. Therefore, if God were to have a physical form, it would be reasonable to assume God could look like the single-celled zygote we all were at the point of conception, an infant, a child, a teenager, a young adult, an older adult, or anywhere in between. Lastly, we imagine God as clothed in these elegant robes and sometimes even crowns. Bear in mind, clothing was a physical representation of one's stature and power in that society. However, for reasons discernable from what I've already said, God has no reason for clothes. The sin of creating an image of God, though, goes beyond just the fact that we are misrepresenting Them.

Consider also what it means for us to create an image of God and say, "This is what God looks like" or "This is what God is." Beyond just creating a false image that looks nothing like God and misrepresenting God, it also misrepresents us as humans. To say God is one thing or another is to exert power and authority over Them and try to squeeze this infinite mystery that theologians and scholars have and will continue to wrestle with for all eternity in a nice, little box. The truth of the matter, though, is that we as humans cannot fit God in a box or even begin to understand the mystery that is God. To create an image of God is to elevate ourselves above the position God gave us in the world, to grant ourselves more power than has been given to us by God, and to falsely claim greater knowledge of the unknowable than we have. So, this creates an interesting question: why create this image of God if none of it is true?

One reason we create this image is the same reason the Israelites had the golden calf made: it makes God more real. Which is easier to worship and believe in: a God that is unseen and unknown, or a God that can be seen and known; a God that exists beyond time and space, or a God that has a specific place in space and time alongside us? The truth is that having an image of what God looks like, is wearing, sounds like, and all these other attributes makes God more tangible to us. We may not have a statue we are bowing down to, praying to, and praising like the golden calf. We have not fallen so far off the bandwagon that we are right there with the Israelites inciting God's anger and jealousy, but we make these images because it helps us to better believe that God is real, tangible, and approachable. This however is not the only reason.

The other reason we create this image of God is because of the Creation story, believe it or not. We are told that humanity is "made in God's image." Often, we interpret this phrase in one particular way: we are made to look like God, as if to say we are a spitting image of God. Therefore, if humans look the way we do, and we are "made in God's image," God must therefore look like us. We've essentially reverse-engineered that phrase from Genesis. However, there is another way to interpret this phrase, and that is that we are made according to the image God had in mind when They conceptualized what a "human" should look like.

So, if we are wrong in imagining God as human, the reason we make God human is wrong, and the Story of the Golden Calf tells us that our making any image of God, physically or simply in our minds, is sinful, how do we rectify this situation? The answer both stories would give us is simple: believe. We do not need to see something to believe it. I can't see the oxygen in the air, but I believe it's there. At the same time, we don't need to understand something to

believe it. Katie and I don't understand how anyone can be a fan of Tom Brady, Pat Mahomes, or Aaron Rogers, but yet, we believe people when they say they love them. Not seeing or understanding something does not keep us from believing it, and that's what both readings invite us to do: to believe, plain and simple. Not to conceptualize, not to understand, not to solve the mystery; just to believe. That is the belief God commands us to have, the belief the Israelites were punished and forgiven for not having, and that we must have, now and always. Can you believe it's that simple?