

## Imago Dei

Genesis 26-31 & Psalm 8

May 26, 2024

Perhaps you've heard about the child in Sunday school who was furiously working with all of her crayons and all of her might on a large piece of construction paper. Her teacher walked over and asked what she was drawing. "I am drawing a picture of God," the girl responded.

"Well, that's wonderful, but remember that nobody knows what God looks like," her teacher gently offered.

To which the little girl replied without interrupting her intense concentration on her work, "Well, they will when I'm finished."<sup>i</sup>

What does God look like? It's a question asked in different ways at every age and in every era. No, we cannot see God, but we keep drawing pictures, pictures that aim to understand a mystery far beyond our knowing.

Since the earliest decades of the Christian faith, disciples of Jesus have professed faith in a triune God. Three distinct persons, one united substance. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. The doctrine of the Trinity is one of Christianity's most defining and inscrutable doctrines. You may know that this is Trinity Sunday, but chances are high that you didn't until you walked in this morning. I do not imagine that any of you will be attending Trinity Sunday picnics after worship or exchanging cards in honor of the occasion. There will be no commercials celebrating the Trinity during the race this afternoon. This holy day, like the teaching it honors, is difficult to market.

At its most basic, the Trinity is a picture of God drawn by faithful and flawed human artists. That picture honors the mystery of the sacred, which we experience in diverse ways and through distinct lenses. A few weeks ago, I was in a Bible study with several church members. We were discussing how and where we experience and encounter the presence of God. It struck me that the answers to those questions were as varied as the individuals gathered. Some felt God's presence in the beauty of nature, some in the harmony of song. Some found God in communal worship, while others preferred the solitude of silence, and still others in conversation with friends. God comes to us in different ways.

The earliest followers of Jesus were faithful monotheists who believed that God was the sovereign creator of the world, the one who called and claimed Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. In their own lives, they experienced the presence of God. They experienced God's presence uniquely in the life and teachings of Jesus.

They came to trust in the saving power of his death and the truth of his resurrection. They believed—they knew by faith, they trusted—that Jesus was the Son of God and the Messiah. And, they were also convinced that God did not exit the scene after creation or after the death and resurrection of Jesus. They experienced God through a spiritual awareness of divine guiding. Father (Creator), Son (Savior), Holy Spirit (ongoing presence of God in the world). The Trinity is the church's attempt to draw a picture of God that takes into account the multiplicity of ways

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<sup>i</sup> Peter Gomes, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, p. 103.

God is known to us. It opens us to the mystery of the God who was, and is, and is to come.

But our understanding of God also says something about us. It is a human endeavor to speak of God. The picture we paint speaks to who we are. To think and talk about God is also to talk about ourselves. "Who is God?" always has a reverse side: "Who am I?" And both of these questions appear in the Bible's very first story, the story of creation.

If we treat this ancient account as history or science, we will miss the depth of its meaning and the breadth of its scope. The first two chapters of the Book of Genesis are a theological reflection on God's creative power. Taken together, the narrative reads like a hymn of praise to the God who is the creator of all that exists. The story is a prayer of gratitude for the beauty of creation and the majesty and the glory of God.

And at the conclusion of the story, that glory of God is shared with the human creature. Human beings, the grand finale to the creation story, carefully fashioned, given responsibility, created in the image of God. The Latin term for this doctrine is *imago dei*. Created in the image of God. The author of Genesis repeats the phrase four times. God speaks to all of creation, but only humans talk back. We were created for relationship with God.

Friends, that is a world-altering thought. The Psalmist reflected on it with appropriate awe. *When I look at your heavens, the moon and the stars, what are human beings that you care for us? Yet you have made us a little lower than God, crowned us with honor and glory.*

You see, from scripture's very first page, we are reminded that we have within us the image and breath (spirit) of God. This is who we are. Each one of us. And every person we encounter. Unique. Distinct. Reflections of the one who created us.

This could be the end of the story, or the end of the sermon—but it's not. The beauty and innocence of the creation story does not persist. From the very beginning, the gift of being created in God's image

was not enough for us. We wanted to be gods. And we still do. Consider this. We all know that technology is advancing at mesmerizing speeds with very few guard rails or guidelines. This rapid change has opened new questions about identity and humanity. Terms like artificial intelligence. Sentient technology. Virtual relationships. I think the biologist E.O. Wilson captured the conundrum best years ago when he wrote, "The real problem of humanity is the following: we have Paleolithic instincts, medieval institutions, and godlike technology." I recently read a harrowing piece that suggested that children born today will have as many relationships with artificial avatars as they will with human friends. I fear we have again attempted to ascend beyond our rightful place, building the contemporary equivalent of towers of Babel meant to reach the throne of God.

And so the question of identity is as urgent now as it has ever been. Who are we, and who are we intended to be? Meant to be? The Psalmist marveled that God, the Creator of all that is, would even take notice of us, stunned by the reality that we are created in the divine image. And I fear that we are at risk of reversing the roles—taking on the power of creation for ourselves, assuming that we in our power and brilliance can form new beings in *our* image, building our own identity out of thin air. I am no prophet, but I will make a future prediction based on past experience. Whenever we attempt to transcend the limits of our humanity, the results are disappointing at best and catastrophic at worst for ourselves, our children and grandchildren, the good gift of creation. For when we take on the role of creator, what we are constructing is not divine, just shiny new idols that will never satisfy our deepest longing or greatest need. Promises of immortality or endless human advancement ignore both our limit and our potential. You see, we were created for relationship.

To be created in the image of God is a profound blessing and a deep responsibility. When we assume that this blessing is not enough for us, we will find ourselves lost in a sea of frustration and unmet desire.

In this pivotal time, people of faith should not bury our heads in the sand and ignore stunning changes around us. But neither should we be silent in the face of shifts that draw us away from God, from each other, from the basic truth of our humanity.

Who is God? God is the One who creates, redeems, and sustains. The One whose grace covers this world. The One whose love is reflected in every blooming plant, every child's laughter, every act of kindness and compassion. God is the source of it all.

And who are you? You are one for whom Jesus Christ lived and died. You are God's creation, made of clay and stardust, filled with God's own breath. You are worthy of love not because of what you've done or will do, but because of who God is.

You are not God. That's good news. And here's more: you were created for relationship with God. Don't settle for anything less than that. Amen.