

The Ones He Makes Holy

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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We've had a full service so far, and we are still looking ahead to the focal point of our worship service today which is the Lord's Supper.

So, my sermon this morning will be brief.

I want to just look at two simple questions.

1. Who is God?
2. Who am I/who are we, as human beings?

I am convinced that these are two of the most important questions that we can ever ask. And they are questions that are addressed by our Scripture reading this morning from the first two chapters of the book of Hebrews.

First, who is God? What is God like?

The ways in which we explicitly and, more often, implicitly answer this question in our daily lives have profound effects upon nearly all that we are and all that we do.

In many ways it is *the* question that stands over so many of life's other questions.

And anyone who has spent even a small amount of time in churchy circles (and beyond) knows that there is quite an array of partial and often destructive conceptions of God that people daily walk around with in their heads.

I made a list of some of the ones that I encounter most frequently:

- God as a punitive judge, hovering menacingly over our every thought and action, waiting for us to make a mistake.

- God as a disinterested cosmic spectator, detached, remote, unapproachable. Impressive and serene, to be sure, but pretty much useless when it comes right down to it.
- God as a coddling therapist, stroking our egos, blessing and baptizing our every inclination, cheering us on, urging us to be true to ourselves.
- God as inflexible policeman, enforcing moral order, making sure the right rules are kept for the right reasons.
- God as crystal ball, predictor of the future, plotter of events yet to come.
- God as insurance policy, a handy thing to have in case of emergencies, but mostly tucked away, out of sight, out of mind.
- God as fellow pilgrim—a wise sage who offers decent advice from time to time, ready and willing to be accessed as one (among many) sources of wisdom and guidance.
- God as healer, binding our wounds, curing our infirmities, easy enough to ignore until things fall apart.
- God as magician, waiting for the right incantations to be spoken, the right prayers offered with enough intensity and fervency to weave his spells and grant our desires.
- God as source of blessing, the one who unlocks heaven's bounty and lavishes it as a reward for those who do or think what is right and true.
- God as divine warrior, arming himself for a final showdown with the forces of darkness.

I regularly hear all of these and more. Again, more often implicitly, although occasionally explicitly. Perhaps you have, too.

And there are hints of truth in some of these, of course. Sometimes barely perceptible, to be sure, but hints, nonetheless.

But each one, on its own, falls short, particularly when it is embraced to the exclusion of others.

None tell the *whole* story of who God is, of what God is like.

So, what *is* God like?

The first four verses of Hebrews 1 give us one of the Scripture's most succinct and comprehensive portrayals of who God is and what God is like.

There's a lot going on in these four short verses. But if I had to summarize, I would say this:

If we want to know who God is and what God is like, we start and stop with Jesus.

In the *past*, Hebrews says, God spoke through prophets and in various other ways. And people came to understand God's nature and character in partial ways.

But *in these last days*, God has spoken definitively, by his Son.

N.T. Wright puts it this way:

God had for a long time been sending advance sketches of himself to his people, but now he's given us his exact portrait.¹

Listen to the language the writer of Hebrews uses.

- He is the reflection of God's glory
- The exact imprint/representation of his being

The exact representation of his being. That's very precise language.

If I were to take out my phone and snap a picture of you right now, I would have a representation of your being, right?

¹ N.T. Wright, *Hebrews for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 3.

[take picture]

I see you all here in this image. I see colours and shapes and faces. This image on my screen could be described as a “representation” of your being.

But would you be comfortable if I went over to someone else and said, “look, this is an exact representation of ____ or ____ or ____ ”

Probably not.

A picture is flat. It’s two-dimensional. It captures a single moment in time. It doesn’t give the whole picture. It’s like those partial images that the writer from Hebrews said God had been pleased to give in the past.

They’re not inaccurate. They’re just not enough.

But what Hebrews says is that in the life, teaching, healing, loving, suffering, dying, and rising from the dead of Jesus of Nazareth, we have the *complete* picture of who God is.

It’s an astonishing claim.

Jesus isn’t some “junior God” dispatched to earth for a few decades to accomplish a few things before retreating to heaven. He’s not *part* of God. He’s not the compassionate, loving, sacrificial side of God (in contrast to the nasty, violent OT God).

No. Jesus is what God looks like.

It is the other portrayals of God—the previous portrayals of God—that are partial. Jesus is the full picture.

If you’re ever struggling with your conception of God, just go back to Jesus. I do this frequently whenever someone tells me they have “issues with God.”

It’s wonderful to say, “well, which God do you have issues with? Because the God I believe in looks and sounds and looks and lives and loves like Jesus. Is this the God you have ‘issues’ with?”

Very often, the answer is, “no.”

Now, Jesus says and does hard things. We’ve seen this in our sermon series on Mark this fall. Jesus regularly challenges us to relinquish our most cherished idols and calls us to a way of life that is counterintuitive and countercultural.

But he does so within the broader context of a self-giving, self-sacrificial, relentless kind of love that is found nowhere else in world history or world religions.

It is an enormous relief to be able to simply, persistently, stubbornly point people toward the character and work of Jesus of Nazareth—the image of the invisible God, the exact presentation of his being—as the fullest expression of who God is and how God is oriented toward his people.

Ok, we’ve looked at what Hebrews has to say about the “who is God?” question. What about the “who am I/who are we?” question?

Hebrews 2 points us in this direction.

In verse 5, the writer begins by quoting Psalm 8. *What are human beings that you are mindful of us?*

- You have made them “a little lower than the angels”
- ... crowned them with glory and honour
- ... subjected all things under their feet

This is a rather exalted picture of human beings—one we perhaps aren’t even comfortable with.

We look around at the vast scope of the cosmos and we can feel pretty small.

We look around at how we have done with this “dominion over all things” business and we see a history of environmental degradation and poor stewardship.

We haven't always done a very good job bearing the image of God. We have not cared for our neighbour, ourselves, or creation as well as we ought to have.

Some point to passages like this as part of the problem. *We're just another animal, nothing special about us, the sooner we realize this, the better!*

But Scripture stubbornly insists that human beings have a crucial and utterly unique role to play in the story God is telling.

(Completely secular environmental groups also assume that human beings are unique, no matter what they might officially say about how we're just another animal. Apes and frogs and goldfish aren't being held responsible for the state of the world, after all!)

At any rate, God, evidently, still thinks rather highly of us! Perhaps even more than we think of ourselves.

So highly, that he went the way of the cross. This is the theme that our text today ends with, and which we will of course remember at this table in a few moments.

God, in Christ suffered on our behalf. As this theologically loaded phrase from verse 9 puts it, he "tasted death for everyone."

The human burdens of sin and evil become Christ's to bear, and his holiness and his righteousness become ours to receive by faith.

Because of this accomplished work of Jesus, we who believe in him as Saviour and Lord, are all one family, whoever we are, wherever we are, however we worship.

And now that the Son is no longer on earth, we—the church—are the Jesus that the world sees.

We are *not* an exact representation of God's being. Not by a long shot. As we saw earlier, *Jesus* is what God has to say about who he is.

But we, the church, are one of the ways in which he says it.

We, in all our global diversity and colour, all our different languages and rituals, all our different traditions and practices, are one of the ways in which the pioneer of our salvation continues to bring many sons and daughters to glory.

So, to bring it back to where I started with our two questions.

Who is God? What is God like?

God is like Jesus—a God of suffering, self-sacrificial, and relentlessly determined love.

Who are we?

We are the image-bearers of God, a “little lower than the angels,” the brothers and sisters of Jesus in the big and beautiful family of God.

We are the ones he makes holy

And who we are is because of who God is.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

