

READINGS

Old Testament

Genesis 1:26

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...”

Exodus 19:16-22

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightening, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain....

So Moses went up and the Lord said to him, “Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the Lord and [thereby] many of them perish. Even the priests who approach the Lord must consecrate themselves, or the Lord will break out against them.”

Numbers 12:5-8

Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the Tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam... [and said]

When a prophet of the Lord is among you,
I reveal myself to him in visions,
I speak to him in dreams.
But this is not true of my servant Moses;
His is faithful in all my house.
With him I speak face to face,
Clearly and not in riddles;
He sees the form of the Lord.

New Testament

Luke 3:21-22

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

John 1:17-18

For the law was given through Moses;
grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.
No one has ever seen God...[except Jesus Christ]

John 17:22-26

[Jesus] “And I have given them glory which you gave me, that they may be one as we are one. I am in them, and you are in me, so that their unity with us and with each other may stand consummated and complete. I pray for this, that the world may realize that you sent me and that you love them as you love me...you loved me before the foundation of the world... I have told them what you are like...[and] that the love with which you loved me may be in them...”

1 John 7-8

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

HOW DO YOU SEE GOD?

For those who do not know me, I am JP Gough.

And for those who do know me, you must be asking yourselves,

What is this church coming to? JP in the pulpit? You've got to be kidding.

And you are still here...

So you either believe that God is truly forgiving and merciful,

or

you have total faith in God's aim with the lightening bolts....

But with all kidding aside, which of those visions do you identify with? How do you see God? ...

*The loving Father figure or ...
the Zeus-like figure on his throne handing out judgments?*

* * * * *

SERMON

Without realizing it, everything we do – or don't do – what ever we think and see in life, is affected by our expectations and perceptions of how everything works. Some call this your “paradigm” and others, your “filter”.

Think about that for just a few seconds. The career we labor in, the people we associate with, the spouse we chose, the food we eat, the car we drive ... the list goes on... *ad infinitum* ... everything is packed with at least one expectation if not a complex mix of several.

Some of our expectations in life have been shaped by experience. As a child, if you were not so lucky, you learned about the danger of fire by touching it – or touching the hot stove.

For myself, I figured out the danger of fire without having to touch it. But I did have a special learning experience with electricity at the age of 2. I stuck a steel fork into an electric socket – not once, but twice – and within minutes. I needed to make sure I really understood the dynamics of – *literally* – being blown across the room both times.

It is said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over but expecting a different result. That was not my case, I was merely trying to confirm the previous result. But after I was caught trying to do it the 3rd time within minutes, my parents decided that putting caps on the outlets was the best deterrent to what was only the beginning of my persistent search for first-hand knowledge in many things...

However most of our expectations have been shaped – not through experiences – but through transfers of knowledge from others. Expectations are taught or transferred from one generation to another; from a group leader or pioneer to the others in a group; and in recent generations, even from books and movies.

Transmitting knowledge has proven to be so beneficial to our species that we have institutionalized it beyond just the family unit and the tribe to more formal schooling, right on up to post-graduate work.

Institutionalized learning has helped civilization progress very rapidly, because we do not have to constantly re-invent things, like ... *wheels*. Because of condensed transfers of knowledge, mankind has built population densities that were unimaginable only 150 years ago – as well as life styles that were similarly unforeseen even 4 generations ago.

Imagine the progress of the last 4 generations when compared to the fact that only 800 generations ago, our ancestors just began to walk on their hind legs; when they could not even conceive of the idea that the moon itself could be walked upon.

Without a foundation of knowledge, mankind could never have challenged its preconceived concepts of the world around them in order to build the world that exists around us now. Modern progress has done much to free man on the material plane, allowing for more time to think, recreate and to *re-create*.

And while institutionalized learning has certainly freed man on the material plane of this earthly existence, I question what institutionalized learning has done for man in terms of his spiritual development.

Have we been able to truly challenge the 799 generations of “knowledge transfers” from our first-upright standing ancestors so as to lift us higher on the spiritual plane too?

Do you see God any differently than our ancient ancestors? Do you see God with *fear* or *love* or plainly *not at all*? I know many who see God with fear and far less who see God with love – but most I know do not see God at all. [I know this well, because I did not see God at all, ...and not that long ago myself.]

Does the way you see God serve you? Do you live in conscious awareness of God? Have you developed a personal relationship with him and Jesus?

* * * * *

It is difficult to grasp *ideas* ...or anything abstract. To deal with abstract ideas, most of us form them into pictures. As John of the Gospels said, God has never been seen by anyone except Jesus.

So what is your picture of God? And how do **you** fit into that picture *with him*?

This is not a philosophical question. This is critical as to how you relate to God.

If you cannot frame your picture of God, with you in it, you may be missing a conscious understanding of God in your life. You may be missing something that could revolutionize your life.

* * * * *

The first 650 generations of mankind feared and worshipped forces in nature. Someone at some point determined that there were thousands of ‘gods’ that inhabited every aspect of the world. And our pre-history ancestors taught their children this concept which became a foundation of many of mankind’s approaches to God.

From appeasing the forces of nature, mankind moved toward collections of gods with human character – fully loaded with flaws. These gods were spiteful and petty if not downright mean-spirited and blood-thirsty.

The ancient gods demanded all sorts of sacrifices, including human in a number of cases. These gods had to be appeased and everyone had to be on their toes all the time, because you just didn't know when – or exactly why – the gods might “smite” you.

As some of the ancient religions evolved, the gods were seen more and more as distant, isolated, passionless and compassionless –uninvolved in individual lives if not also in the life of whole peoples.

Many of these perspectives were adopted by the Hebrews in their own portrayal of God – demanding sacrifice while largely distant and uninvolved – except at critical junctures in their historical *past*. It is interesting that the Jews were told by a number of prophets that God did not want animal sacrifices, but they continued to offer them anyway.

After all, the acceptance of an idea is predicated on the predisposition to receive it. All the nations around them were giving sacrifices to their gods, why wouldn't the Hebrew God want it too? It is important to realize that different ages end up with certain dispositions – all of which flavors or distorts what they hear and understand.

In today's selected readings from the Old Testament, we see a distant God. One who would even kill the average Joe for seeking to be in his presence. But this reading also reinforces a hierarchy in approaching God – the priests can do it if they have been cleansed, but not the average David or Mary.

The Jews adapted to this vision of a demanding, distant and non-compassionate God with a long list of laws – so as to keep the average person from offending him. Over time, the Jewish law-givers kept adding to this long list of do's and don'ts. After all, the law-givers had to demonstrate that they were doing their jobs.

But by the time of Jesus Christ, the Jewish people were burdened by thousands of petty and life-complicating laws which served no purpose other than the logical idiocy of religious leaders, safely protected from all the challenges and consequences of common daily living.

What these laws did was to make people think that currying favor with God was nothing more than a superficial thing – it didn't really matter what you thought as long as you did not **do** the dastardly thing. Or if you did do something not so nice, it was OK if you did it within the constructs of established religious process. The Jewish religion in the time of Christ was focused on the letter of the law and not the spirit of the law.

I do not think that enough of us understand the revolution that Jesus Christ brought to the Jewish World. It was not only that he may or may not have claimed in public that he was the Messiah. There were others who had made such claims who were not crucified.

Jesus was crucified because he challenged the very core expectations held by the Jewish leadership about life, their role in it and ultimately their relationship with God. The vision Jesus was telling people did not meet anyone's expectations in any form in that time.

One thing about us human beings... We can put up with anything: bad government, bad service, long gas lines, high prices – *but not with our theology or our philosophy*. We get so angry when there is disagreement on either of those two items, that we kill for them; families blow apart over them; and lifetime friendships fizzle away.

And why? What I find most interesting in disagreements about philosophy or theology is that none of them have any real impact on day-to-day living. But we still kill or destroy over these differences. I've even seen boards of directors of corporations torn apart by differences in corporate philosophies – none of which would impact profitability or risk.

The Pharisees viewed authority as judgmental, if not savage, unforgiving, censorious and condemnatory: *The right to condemn; the duty to punish*. This is how they viewed God; this is how they ran Palestine; this is how they lived.

The Pharisees never viewed authority and power as loving, sympathetic and forgiving.

Then Jesus of Nazareth comes along and preaches that God is our Father; that he loves us and wants nothing more than to forgive us and see us grow. Jesus told the people that the nature and beauty of God is that he is not a tyrant, but a loving Father.

Furthermore, Jesus told the people that God is available to each of us – directly – and that there is no unbridgeable gulf between us and God. And to help us, Jesus is the bridge so that humans can more easily access God and his grace. The Jews had come to believe that God didn't talk to normal people; he spoke to the High Priest, on the Day of Atonement, in the Holy of Holies. No one else was qualified or acceptable.

Jesus opened the world to a completely new idea of God as loving and approachable. And with it, Jesus changed the world's view of the purpose of life.

But you are probably asking, "Didn't Jesus change our relationship with God? Wasn't God really rough and demanding as we see him in the Old Testament?"

No, Jesus did not change God or God's attitude toward mankind. It is not God who changed, but our knowledge of him – because of Jesus.

Furthermore, we learned from Jesus that God is not distant and dispassionate about us and this world. God is intimately involved in this world. This is God's world, his creation; we can never despise it. It serves his purposes. And God's ways are not man's ways.

The Father is not fully happy until his children have returned home – just as Jesus tried to explain in the parable about the prodigal son. He does not smash his children into submission as widely believed, but woos them with love.

Jesus didn't come to talk about God but to show us what the Father is like – as he went around the land curing the ill (in the name of our Father) and trying to get people to be receptive to a different vision.

What a message. But if you were a Pharisee, you'd be having heart failure. Since the ancient world was constructed on a vision of coercion, how could anyone in authority (trained in all manners of coercion) buy into the idea of authority based on love. A world and a heaven based on love? He was putting their careers, their lives and their worlds in jeopardy. This was a difference of view that they would kill over; never having qualms about using ends to justify their means.

* * * * *

In some form or proximity, you've heard this before. So how does the rubber meet the road here today?

Only 2½ years ago, you would not have heard me say any of this. You certainly would not have found me in the pulpit. You see, I used to hold an Old Testament picture of God. Despite growing up in an active Christian family, the true paradigm of Jesus Christ was not taught to me. I grew up believing in *The Law*, in wrote prayers and in ceremony.

I saw God as cold, distant, lacking in passion and compassion and totally uninvolved in my life. I saw myself as too small, too insignificant and all together unknown to Him. I saw life as a series of random events which sometimes caught the good guys sideways and destroyed them.

Fortunately, I never doubted God's or Jesus's existence. I just didn't think they were aware of me – never mind having any concern about me. My life experiences had taught me that they were not with me. I grew up lonely, fearful, in survival mode and alone in a crowded war zone at home. But because I could still feel a resonance of God in my heart (without knowing it to be him), I have always tried to be good for no particular reason – a state of being not unfamiliar to most I would guess.

And yes, I've been coming here to this church for about 11 years – eight years begrudgingly. On occasion I would give into my wife's desire to have me join her. While I would rather be reading, meditating (the zoning to nothingness program, not a Christian version of communication with the Divine) or exercising I dragged myself here. The nice people, along with the coffee and desserts, were a salve for the expenditure of my time. But I didn't come here for any spiritual reason.

I only came the first time after reading Bruce Van Blair's sermon, "Where Have All The Fathers Gone." I thought, "Thank God. Here is a guy who can speak in real English." I was tired of all the nonsense from make-you-feel-good ministers at most of the churches who seemed to focus on social issues as the lever to everyone's spiritual well-being, using arguments that always seemed to fly in the face of "grace."

I still remember the first time a born-again told me that God loves me. I was torn between the impulse to laugh at him in contempt and an overwhelming desire to punch him in the nose.

I was infuriated at his audaciousness to assume that he could know what God is like and is thinking – *particularly about me*. That was a vision beyond my ability to imagine – because I was really angry at God. None of the world made sense to me and I couldn't wait to get through it.

So what made me change? What made me one day realize in pure shock at the understanding that: "Yes! I am born-again"? Plain and simple: personal crisis.

I was never afraid of dying. I had almost died in my life about 3 times – I've had the lights, the floating... the works; the sensation had become a friend instead of an unknown. Two other times, doctors told me that I would die soon, but their prognoses now seem to have been in error.

Each experience of near death was truly mystical for me where I experienced the presence of God and yet each time I ended up coming back, picking up life where I left off -- period. There was no mystical, long-term transformation in the aftermath. While I cherished these mystical experiences, I continued to doubt the involvement of God and Jesus in my life. *I was still not getting it.*

I knew that one day I would welcome death but that the moment of that event was not for me to choose. And the Father knew that too. So he had to choose something about which I cared deeply – *more deeply than life*. And the perfect crisis arrived. A perfect storm. One in which my innate goodness and abilities didn't matter.

In the movie, *The Kid*, the news anchor woman, Deirdre, in a powerful moment, says to Bruce Willis in the middle of his crisis:

"Don't ever stop asking for help. You may just get it."

You see, I would later learn that this sense of overwhelm and personal inadequacy is the necessary requirement of the first *Beatitude*:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Only those who figure out that they can't do it on their own and who ask for help, are those who can take the first step on the path laid out by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount.

I use to despise people who would only profess God when they had to; when they felt *need* in the middle of a crisis. That kind of conversion just didn't seem genuine to me; "Rice Christians"¹ I used to call them. I have never liked friendships that were created out of *need* as opposed to *choice*. But then I found in my own experience that this world is filled with need because "faith is born of a sense of need."

[Remember, God's ways are not man's ways.]

But if we insist on handling it all ourselves, we are then at the mercy of our passions and fears. And in my crisis, I had such horrific choices and probable outcomes.

So I was sitting in quiet trying to figure it all out. And unlike most times, when a multitude of voices would be jamming my thought processes, only one voice spoke. For the first time in my life, there was a stillness in my mind except for one voice. And this voice had a rationale and wording that could not be my alter ego; this syntax was not mine, the thought processes were completely outside my ability or willingness to have initiated them.

And then I asked the question, "Who are you?" And the answer rocked my world, "I've been waiting your whole life for you to ask that question."

And in a split second I re-lived *hundreds of moments* where my "intuition" or "the voice" saved me from making mistakes of word or action; saving me from horrific accidents and other times, guiding my life through important choices. Like the time I met a young woman on my 7th day in California and I heard, "This is the woman you will marry." God had been active in my life even when I continued to ignore its possibility.

After those flashbacks, the dialogue took off. When it was all finally over, 4 hours had passed and many of my bigger questions in life had been answered. And I realized some very important facts which have changed my life and my approach to it:

- That God and Jesus had been active parts of my life, my whole life, and will continue to be.
- I came to realize that our sight depends on *what is in us*; what it is inside of us that enables us to understand what we're seeing and hearing.
- I came to realize that it is not a question of to whom God speaks, but a question of who is listening.
- I came to realize that my visual image of our Father – *a la* Zeus on his throne in Olympus – was totally wrong. Our Father is not a broken personality needing us to prostrate ourselves and tell him how great he is. If he wanted that, he would

¹ "Rice Christians" is a term from the late 19th century/early 20th century in which missionaries would entice Chinese peasants to come to services with the reward of rice after the service. After a while, they would test to see which Chinese would stay for services if they knew that rice would not be available for their efforts on those days. Almost all the time, the church was empty if no rice was being offered.

not have created freedom of will.

The Father is not looking for subservience and surrender generated by fear of his strength and his might. He is looking for joyful and free commitment. He wants a relationship built on free choice and a love for him; not fear and not by having to be bought off with favors either.

- God's grace creates everyone's perfect situation; each one's environment and opportunities perfectly matched to each person's needs: our wealth/poverty, our looks, our loved ones and others in our lives, as well as our demons. But in every environment, at every fork in the road, we have choice.
 - The world is not random.
 - There are no coincidences.
 - There is no luck.
- Learned Truth is doubly strong and impactful as opposed to being "given" it. Our experiences become the opportunities by which we learn Truth. And the more we ignore the presented Truth, the harder the sequences of next experiences become.

Prayer is dialogue with the Father and/or with Jesus and it should be as easy as talking with your best friend on the seat next to you as you drive the car. As Jesus told us, do not pray as the pagans do, in repetitious memorized prayers, louder and louder.

When you dialogue with the Father or Jesus, be totally present with intent. The Father can dialogue with all living things in the universe, on any topic of importance to each individual living thing – and *all at the same time*.

To have dialogue with the Father and with Jesus, you must:

1. Believe a relationship is possible
2. Believe you are worthy of the relationship – because it is a gift;
nothing is required to access it other than faith and acceptance
3. Be open to receive
4. Ask to receive. If you can't ask, one of the other requirements is missing.

When you dialogue with the Father or Jesus, ***feel the truth of it***. Even when we cannot understand with our intellect, we can feel truth with our hearts – this is a gift of the Holy Spirit which is in any person attempting to access the straight and narrow path.

Another thing I learned is that our Father does not set us up to fail in this world. He may push us to our limits – but not to fail. There is no challenge or struggle that he gives us in which we are predetermined to fail; winning or succeeding is always an option.

Everything around us is intended to teach us faith.

- We are given joy, but we are also given sorrow to experience comfort;
- difficulties are given to experience strength;
- turmoil is given to experience peace; and
- depression is given to experience the uplifting to higher visions.

God wants us to find him, but he wants us to work at it so that we own it and cherish it. When we were all spirits before our births, we could not experience consequences and as such could not value anything.

I have had many times when I feel I have arrived to the top of the mountain; that I have figured something out – except that now I look out beyond my pinnacle only to see yet another, higher mountain next to this one. And that the trip requires a tedious descent and another disciplined ascent.

All of life is based on the fact that anything worth having has to be worked for. There is always a price to be paid for anything of value or a risk to be taken. The world is full of people who missed their destiny because they would not work for it; they would not step out of their cozy little world and take any risks.

But when you take risks, you have a greater existence on this earth. And a great tragedy of refusing risk is that God and others have invested of themselves in preparing you for that task or journey which is then not taken.

Through daily dialogues, my journey has been wonderful, if not always perfect and smooth. I was guided to read the bible with seriousness for the first time in my life – and because of that seriousness, it started to reveal things to me I had never seen before.

I have become more conscious of many things that now happen in my life that I used to regard as coincidences or luck but now I know better. Like when I was told a book was on its way to me to better understand the Sermon on the Mount.

That next day, our minister Chip took the daring risk of sending such a book home through my wife to me. He took the risk in sending it to me, a distant, non-participative church member (who he heard had just started reading Matthew); my wife herself brought the book home with trepidation. “Ah, Chip thought you might like to read this...” It took two weeks before I finally surrendered and I started to read the 600 page book. I couldn’t put it down till I had read it three-times². And my conversion to being a Christian was solidly launched.

And I have come to know a peace that I never before could have imagined. My space is kept safe by the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The chaos is gone.

² Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn, *STUDIES IN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT*, Second Edition 1976; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI.

In closing, I would like to stress that the essential characteristic of Christianity is experience – thought, discussion, action. St. Patrick and Pelagius were right; Augustine was wrong. Being Christian is not about *The Law* – a static equation of do's and don'ts drawn up by a bunch of elite recluses. The Christian journey is one to be lived – for its moment to moment experience – in reaching out to, communing with and hopefully touching the Divine.

But to do so, you must be clear about how you see that relationship with God and Jesus. Because the limits you put into your vision will become the limits of your experience.

So,... how do you see God?

* * * * *

Closing Prayer

I ask our Father that:

You may come to know his voice, which brings peace to mind;
You may come to know his love, which banishes fear and brings warmth and safety;
And you may come to know his will, which provides a joyful sense of purpose for you in his Kingdom.