



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

So last week we had a kind of impromptu dinner party. And as we were eating, one of the guests who was sitting next to me, she leaned over and she says, "So I hear you're some kind of a minister?" And I said, "Yeah, something like that." And she pulled out her phone and she slid it over to me and it was all queued up. And she said, "Then you have to listen to this sermon because it is powerful." And so I leaned over and looked at it and, okay, for a split second, hoping it was one of mine, which it was not Manisha. Yes, it was not.

I said, "Wow, this sounds great and all." And it was long, like 50 minutes long. I said, "But why don't you just tell me what spoke to you? What was so powerful about it? What was its message?" And she said, "Well, it's all about how we are all living on probation. And what's more, time is running out." And I said, "Really? Probation?" She's like, "Yeah, probation. Have you heard this one?" And I said, "No, but let me guess. Would there be any chance that God is the probation officer?" She said, "Yeah, that's right." And I said, "Well, and is it any chance that that probation officer, if we don't get right with God, is going to sentence us." And she says, "Yeah, to everlasting Hell."

This is just a light dinner conversation, right, that goes on at our house. When you become a priest, you get this sort of thing. Anyway, so I was reflecting on this conversation, and it occurred to me that in this last week of Advent, as we bring this season of waiting to a close, it might be worth asking ourselves just who is the God that we have been waiting for? We all have an image of God in our hearts, do we not? What does yours look like? And more importantly, I think, how is that image shaping you?

Sister Joan Chittister, a Benedictine Nun, who was right here at Christchurch Cranbrook a couple months ago, she said it this way:

"In the long light of human history, it is not belief in God that sets us apart. It is the kind of God in which we choose to believe in that makes all the difference in our life and in the world."

In other words, we are all created in the image of God, no doubt. But at the end of the day, Chittister and others want to suggest that it is our image of God that ultimately creates us. It's our image of God that defines us, that validates us, that shapes our worldview, that informs how we relate to others. And I think she

makes a good point. After all, many of us have probably known someone who believes in that kind of a harsh, unforgiving probation officer. And have you noticed that they themselves tend to be just as inflexible, just as rigid, just as judgmental as the God they worship?

After all, if I see God as a harsh judge, why shouldn't I be one as well? If I see God as capable of great anger, who punishes the disobedient, why shouldn't I punish my enemies just as well? If my image of God is one who can withhold forgiveness of His own children, then why should I let go of my grudges and my resentments? If God's love is conditioned on what I say or what I do, or how often I come to church, or how often I pray, or how forgiving I am, or how perfect I am, then I end up living my life forever looking over my shoulder, anxious if I will ever measure up.

And I think it's true on the other side of the spectrum as well. If I see God as a distant and aloof deity, then I'm probably more likely to live life under my own power and to rely on myself when I need God the most. If my image of God is way up there and I'm down here, how am I going to see God in my neighbor? If my image of God is so big and so remote, if God is only concerned with the big events of human history, with the great saints and the heroes of the faith, how am I ever going to find God in my small life? If I see God as an escape plan for this broken and corrupt world, then why should I care about taking care of it? If the name of the game is getting to the next world, why should I care what happens to this one?

Whether we realize it or not, our image of God determines the world we live in and the way we live in it. And if we're not careful, We can create for ourselves a lonely and unloving universe where despite our belief in God, we are still left to live our life out in our deepest fears.

Thankfully, the gospel, the good news, as it so often does, offers us a very different image. Today's story begins by describing Joseph as a righteous man, someone devoted to God, someone concerned with clean and proper living. Matthew doesn't say this, but reading between the lines, we get the idea that Joseph is probably someone who played by the rules. Someone who's honest and hardworking. Probably not the type of guy who likes to make waves or call attention to himself. Good Midwestern values, as we like to say. Someone who wants nothing more than a normal, uncomplicated life.

And then one morning this faithful unassuming carpenter wakes up and finds that his world has been upside down. His fiancé is pregnant. He knows he's not the father. And in a culture obsessed with family honor and female purity, where marriages weren't about romance but were about arranged public contracts, he knows that he will be the talk of the town no matter how this goes. And again,

Matthew doesn't go into this, but you can imagine the anger he might have felt, the sadness, the humiliation, the feeling of betrayal.

And what about Mary? What about the fears that she would've faced? What does all this mean for her future and her security in a world where women were utterly dependent on their husbands, not to mention the very real danger of any pregnancy in the ancient world, as we've been hearing about in our Sunday forum series. In short, in contrast to the Gospel of Luke, where everyone seems like they're overjoyed at the news and they break out into song and praise, Matthew's birth narrative gives us a sense of the very real human mess that awaits our little Emanuel.

But being a good and decent man, Joseph tries to do the right thing. He knows that if he calls attention to this scandal, Mary might be stoned to death, as the religious law prescribed. And so he resolves to do the compassionate thing, to dismiss her quietly. That is, until God intervenes and says what God always says, do not be afraid.

So what images of God do you see in this story? I noticed that this is a God who doesn't seem to be particularly interested in the high and the mighty, in the well connected or the wealthy. It's a God who comes into the world through an unwed, uneducated peasant, to show us that with this God, even the most powerless and the most vulnerable can change the world. This is a God who doesn't seem to be particularly interested in religious purity codes and social norms. This is a God who comes to us in the form of an illegitimate baby under the cloud of shame. In order to defeat shame, in order to legitimize all children, no matter who we are, where we're from.

This isn't a God who judges us for our fears and for our doubts. It's a God who knows them and gives us the courage to do what seems like the impossible. This isn't a God who's distant and aloof. This is the God who comes among us to enter into the mess that is often our story, so that we might enter His. This is the image of God who came not to evacuate us from this world, but was born into it so that we might learn how to love it and remake it on earth as it is in heaven.

And I realize reflecting on our image of God can be challenging, especially when different churches, different preachers, even the Bible itself, can present us with so many different, sometimes competing images of God. Look no further, for example, than the Psalm today. Where the Psalmist says, in the midst of suffering, in unanswered prayers where he wonders aloud, how much longer will they have to endure God's anger? How are we to know which God to follow? How are we to know which image to hold onto?

Fortunately, for Christians, we have Jesus. For us, the life and the teachings of Jesus is the definitive image of God. A God among us who came to save us by

showing, showing us what is possible with a human life, and then calls us to follow His lead. For Jesus, there was no question, we are to forgive endlessly because we are forgiven endlessly. We are to draw no lines between us because he drew no lines between people. We are to love unconditionally because God loved us unconditionally, and even, and especially those that we call our enemies because for Jesus and for those who follow Him, there are no enemies. There are no outsiders. There are no strangers. There are no black and no white, no Jew, no gentile, no male, no female, no gay or straight, no saved or unsaved. We are all one. All of us brothers and sisters in Christ, each of us a forever beloved child of God.

As we prepare for the coming of God among us once more, what is the image of God you are waiting for? Will we be beholden to uncertainty and doubt or will I let God fill me with confidence and empower me to love? Will I be drawn to the God who justifies my resentments, or to the one who gives me strength to forgive? Will I continue to see God as distant and uncaring, or will I see Him as the one who comes among us again and again to show us the light of His countenance? To save us from our fears, to fill us with overflowing light and love, overflowing mercy, overflowing compassion. Overflowing so that there would be enough despair, overflowing so that there would be enough to share with the world who needs it so much.

Amen.