

## *The God Who Risks*

*The Rev. Joshua Daniel, Ph.D.*

*Phillipians 2:1-13*

A young elementary classroom worked diligently on the assignment they had just received from their teacher. *Draw something creative*, they were told. As the teacher passed through the classroom she asked each student what they had decided to draw. A dog with wings, one said. A rainbow on the moon, said another. *I'm drawing God* squeaked one particularly small voice. *Is that right?* the teacher responded with a smile, her hands resting on the girl's shoulders. *Well that's a tough job since no one really knows what God looks like*, she said. Undaunted the girl with a small voice said under her breath *Well, they're about to find out.*



Images of God come preloaded for us. We awake with them. Whether we believe them or not, whether they bring positive or negative associations, our image of God can seem set and fixed -- just there, like the furniture of our childhood home.

One of my favorite shows is *This American Life*. The clarity of style and compelling narrative voice with which they tell their stories, for me, has meant that years later many of them still seem close to hand. One of the reflections shared by Ira Glass at the beginning of a show last summer has rolled around in my mind ever since.

On his way to a speaking engagement in upstate New York, Ira had struck up a conversation with the volunteer staffer driving him that eventually veered into the realm of religion. The staffer just happened to be a retired Methodist pastor.

Ira had a few years earlier returned to his childhood synagogue on the occasion of the anniversary of his mother's death. Though he had not believed in God in some time, hearing the prayers for the first time in years -- prayers he still knew by heart -- he found himself both comforted and perplexed by them. They were comforting because they were not just his words; they were words his parents had prayed, and his parents parents had prayed, and his parents parents parents had prayed, going back hundreds and hundreds of years.

But also perplexing because so many of those prayers were about praising God. And that seemed odd to him. The Methodist pastor had told Ira that he thought faith boiled down to two essential elements: *Love your neighbor as yourself and love God above all.*

But, Ira wondered, why does God need our love? If God is the Great Almighty, the beginning and the end, the Maker of all things, why does God need to be praised all the time by us? If you do what is right, if you love others, what differences does it make if you do or do not love God?



One of the moments when my picture of God was sent head over heels was when a priest gently suggested that instead of trying to find the God of my childhood in the Bible -- what if, rather, I went the other way around. What if I went looking first for the God that the Bible actually describes? Instead of assuming that God is the God that makes sense of everything -- the God that answers all questions and leaves nothing to doubt -- a picture of God and faith that closely resembles a mathematical formula -- where the answers are all connected and rigidly determined. -- A picture that made a lot of sense to my teenage self.

What if instead I started with the simplest claim of faith -- that Jesus is our image of God -- and let that simple picture slowly inform everything else that I thought about God?

This is exactly Paul's strategy with the Phillipians in our lesson today. It's as if he says to them, if you really want to know what the life of God is like then look at the life of Jesus.

For Jesus life is not about the accumulation of power -- not about wanting to show off power and be admired for it.

Imagine this. Jesus from the beginning of time sits in the presence of his father, sits in the presence of the Spirit. They sing to each other, eternally. Between them, in their heart of hearts, the very cornerstone of creation, is love. And this radiance, this never ending source of abundance and life, spills out from their song. It sweeps over the face of the waters, it ebbs and flows, and eventually it creates. It separates the light from the dark, water from land.

God's creation grows. Seed to plant. Woman to man. God sometimes sends out God's divine self in feminine form to sit and dwell with her creatures -- giving out wisdom and patience. But God sees this is not enough.

Paul tells us that though from the beginning of creation Jesus is in the form of God -- though he sits in the heavenly chambers, far above the sometimes messy chaos of the created order -- Jesus is willing to risk his status. That in an act of vulnerability and trust, Jesus stands up, empties himself of his divine position and leaps into creation.

And while in creation, what does Jesus care about? He spends his time with the outcasts, the sick, and the vulnerable. He teaches his disciples by example to forgive, to be defined by mercy and hope. So little did he care about the powers of force and recognition, he gives up his life. He humbles himself to the point of death -- even death on a cross.

Paul encourages the church in Phillipi to live humbly as Jesus did. Humility though, in the ancient Mediterrian world, was not considered a virtue. Humility meant weakness. An embarrassing loss of self. Something no self-respecting person would voluntarily agree to.

Paul emphasizes the form of Jesus' death again and again. Jesus was not just executed. He was executed on a cross. Imperial Rome understood the human psyche. Public crucifixion was meant to shame and humiliate. Meant as a profound demonstration of cruel force.

But Paul holds up the image of Jesus' cross as the beacon of faith. As the perfect sign for the shape of our lives. For God so loved the world, God gave up her position of power, jumped into creation, absorbed all kinds of violence and humiliation, and responded not in kind but in forgiveness and mercy.



This is an image of God very unlike what my teenage self could understand. An image not of endless confidence and self-assured answers. Not of a God distant and selfishly interested in our endless praise. What do we mean by God? We mean something like this. God is that which risks. That which reaches out in friendship. Jesus -- our image of what God is -- enjoins himself with creation. He invites John to baptize him, he washes Peter's feet. He eats with the unseemly. God is that which is willing to empty itself, to give up all sovereignty and power for the purposes of love and forgiveness and peace.

When I say I believe in God, I believe in this.

And with this image of God, Paul asks us to draw creatively. Imagine our communities. Imagine our world. If there is encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, be of the same mind.

What could we be if this were true? How might our lives be different. Imagine the real presence of God sitting next to you. Feel that power of love and generosity and warmth. What slights could I absorb, what evil could I overcome?

Draw outside the lines you were given. Fill this world with the love it so desperately needs. Wait and listen for that still small voice. Under its breath it's saying, *What does God look like? Watch you're about to find out.* Amen.