

Sunday, October 19, 2014
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Would You Recognize God?”

For the past several weeks the Sunday school children have been answering the question, “What does God look like?”

They have explored the idea of a King, a loving Father, a loving Mother, the Light, a rock, a shepherd, and my favorite, a hen!

The purpose of their study is to develop an understanding of the many faces of God – the multiple ways that God is evident to us in our lives.

It helps us to create ways to envision God – it is a way of comprehending the greatness of God.

In the Exodus story today, Moses continues working with God on building a relationship with the somewhat reluctant and distracted, chosen people of Israel.

Given the doubting, the dancing before idols and the constant murmuring against Moses, God has good reason to leave the Israelites right there, in the wilderness, and move on to another people.

Moses is like an agent for an out-of-control celebrity: in delicate negotiations.

He’s definitely not a peer in this conversation, and he is acutely aware of what God can do when provoked.

He has pressed his case on behalf of his people, reminding God that they are nobody, no people at all, without God.

Moses is expressing the heart of covenantal theology--to God!--and he meets with success when God responds, "I will do the very thing you have asked" and promises to be present with the people on their way.

This promise endures today.

God is with us, always present, on our journey.

One author pointed out "the word for 'presence,' *panim*, literally means 'face.'

A person's face tells us that the person is with us.

It shines out with the person's love and concern."

How beautiful: instead of seeing God as fearsome and terrifying, we understandably yearn to see the face of God shining upon us with love and concern.

That is if you think that God has a face.

God tells Moses that God's face will not be revealed – only his back – his presence will be made known.

There are countless ways to feel God's presence – to witness God's power.

The autumn leaves for example.

Or a rainbow!

Or the face of someone we love.

Have you seen the face of God reflected in someone's loving gaze?

Does your face shine with love and concern for others?

Would another person see the face of God when they look at you?

Last week, before the Fall Festival began the volunteers and I gathered for a brief time of prayer.

The words that came to me were – let each person see Christ reflected in our faces.

That is what God looks like. God looks like you!

God calls you by name.

When the religious leaders tried to trap Jesus with their question about paying taxes, they thought there were only two possible answers.

If Jesus had said it was wrong to pay taxes, they could have informed the Roman authorities and had Jesus arrested for treason.

If Jesus had said that it was right to pay taxes to Caesar, they could have labeled him as a betrayer of God's people and discredited him as a prophet.

Jesus cleverly uses the face of Ceasar on the coin to characterize to whom the money belongs.

He leaves the Pharisees guessing as to what belongs to God.

Sometimes, we may feel that we have to choose between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God.

Some of us may feel that all we can do is worship God as best we can on Sundays and then live by the values and priorities of the world during the week.

Others may feel the need to opt out of the world completely.

They may try to limit involvement with the world and its systems as much as possible, and retreat into a spiritual compound where they can follow a different way.

Jesus, however, invites us to try a third option, which is not a choice between God and the world, but an opportunity to allow our faith to interact with the world in which we live.

In this third way, we live within society as good citizens and neighbors, and we fulfill our role in our chosen field.

But, in everything we do, and in every interaction with others, we seek to live by the values and priorities of Jesus, allowing God's Reign to be expressed in the world through us – allowing God's loving face to shine through us.

When we separate our faith from our lives, we miss the signs of God's reign in our homes, workplaces and neighborhoods.

When we learn to be open to the signs of God's presence, we begin to notice all the ways God is at work in surprising places, and we are able to cooperate with the work of God.

We are able to see the face of God – to feel God's presence with us throughout our day.

As followers of Jesus who believe in the way of Jesus, it can be tempting to try and impose our view of the world and our standards of behavior on others.

When we do this, we mistake the kingdom of God for the kingdoms of this world, and we turn Jesus into another Caesar.

Our task is not to win control over the systems of power in our world.

Our job is to follow a completely different path, to embrace a completely different version of power, and to follow Christ in the midst of a world that does not yet manifest God's Reign to the full.

While we hope and pray for the day when God's Reign is fully revealed in our world, we recognize that only God can bring this into being.

On a smaller scale, we also wrestle with the temptation to confuse God's kingdom with our own little kingdoms.

We may seek to become Caesars over those around us, convinced that if everyone just did what we told them they, and we, would be much happier.

There is also the temptation to make certain people, ideas or organizations like Caesars to us, following them with blind obedience.

Of course, we need to make commitments to our families, employers, and churches, but our primary devotion must always be to God.

It is God's values and priorities that must take precedence even as we live in these other social groups.

This past week, I had the opportunity to visit the island of Nantucket.

I know that many of you have traveled here and are familiar with the beauty.

Nantucket is a place where God's creative power is manifest in stunning landscape, intensified by the autumn colors.

We visited the beach, deserted at this time of year, just before a storm.

The roar of the ocean waves breaking on the pristine beach serves as a reminder of God's power and our smallness.

Nantucket is a place where one is faced with choices, not dissimilar to those of both our readings this morning.

The material wealth can easily overshadow the natural beauty – if you let it.

There was an interesting article in one of the real estate magazines lamenting the destruction of the historical buildings whose facades are being maintained, but whose interiors are being gutted to provide the modern conveniences to which we've become accustomed.

I read this as a metaphor for our own journeys.

We must be cautious that we don't sacrifice our closeness with God in developing facades of holiness.

While we do need to "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar" we must always be careful to "give to God what belongs to God."