

Greg Hildenbrand

The Faces of God

Greg Hildenbrand



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my late parents, Arthur Leroy and Iona Jean (Quiggle) Hildenbrand, who were the first faces of God for me on earth.

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Between Stan and Grace, my words attain a level of articulation well beyond what I am capable of producing alone. For that, you the reader should be thankful.

Introduction

One of the most influential teachers in my spiritual development has been Richard Rohr. During the opening session of the CONSPIRE 2017 Conference¹, Father Richard said, “If we don’t have the shape of God correctly named, everything built on top of it doesn’t work.” When our understanding of the *shape* of God is inaccurate, the entire foundation of our faith is askew, and it does not adequately explain the reality we experience. All of the reflections contained in *The Faces of God* were inspired by Rohr’s idea that we must get the shape of God right before we can begin to understand the nature of God. In addition, more accurately understanding the shape of God is foundational to our ability to understand scripture.

Most of us have an image of God based more on art and mythology than on the God described in the Bible. The most common image conforms to Michelangelo’s portrayal of God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. We tend to picture God as an old, white, bearded male, floating on a distant cloud somewhere above us. While the image may make good art, it is poor theology. For starters, God is not a *being*, at least not as we understand beings. God is not exclusively white or male or old. These are human traits we have placed upon God as we seek to make God in *our* image, instead of the other way around.

As I hope becomes clear in what follows, we cannot comprehend God in God’s fullness by attaching earthly or human limitations onto God. God is infinitely bigger than we can imagine or

describe, and God is indescribably closer to all of creation than we dare to believe. The truth about God and God's relationship to us seems too good to be true. We feel unworthy of such intimacy and, quite frankly, it scares us.

The faces of God described herein begin with aspects of God described by writers of the Old Testament. The second section reflects upon God as revealed through Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament. Finally, the third section is devoted to the Trinity. I invite you to peruse these pages in whatever order you are led to read. The reflections do not build upon one another, nor is one required for the understanding of another.

The Faces of God is my vain attempt to consider a few of the many and varied ways God manifests in and through our lives. I pray the reader's understanding and experience of our amazing and unfathomable God will somehow be expanded and affirmed in these pages. The truth of God is both too complex and too simple for words, and yet we are compelled to continue trying to capture the nature of God in language. As John of the Cross wrote, "God cannot be *known*; God can only be *loved*"².

Thomas Merton, the 20th Century Christian mystic, wrote "I have only one desire, and that is the desire for solitude – to disappear into God, to be submerged in His peace, to be lost in the secret of His face."³ Linger, as you find faces of God that are familiar and welcoming. Linger, and lose yourself in the wonderful secrets of God's face.

Greg Hildenbrand
January 2018

Part 1

Old Testament Faces

1.

Unseen Movement

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the waters.

Genesis 1:1-2

John 1:18a tells us, “No one has ever seen God.” If that is true, how can I presume to write anything worthwhile about the “faces” of God? My usage of *faces* here refers to God’s *persona* – God’s *mask*, if you will – or the different ways God appears to us on earth. In the way a versatile actor portrays many characters, so God manifests in our lives under many different *faces*.

The first manifestation from God recorded in the Bible is that of *wind*. “A wind from God swept over the waters” (Genesis 1:1). Meteorologists tell us that winds are movements of air from areas of high atmospheric pressure to areas of low pressure. It is an informative description of *unseen movement* from point to point. Jesus tells Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish elite, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). One way God manifests is as unseen movement. We do not know where it comes from or where it goes, but we can perceive its motion around and through us when we pay attention.

A common illustration of unseen movement is found in the water cycle. Water flows from higher areas down into lakes, streams, and oceans until evaporation carries it back up into the atmosphere, only to fall back to earth as rain. It is a constantly reoccurring sequence, emptying and refilling, happening outside of our conscious awareness, and it pervades every corner of the earth. Nothing is ever lost; it only changes form and location. Blood flow in the body is another example, where the heart pushes

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and ever-flowing relationship between
all parts of creation.***

blood out to the organs and extremities, and then draws it back in. In respiration, we breathe in, and we breathe out. These movements of air, wind, water, and blood support all of life, and they are animated by and completely dependent upon the unseen movement of God.

Of course, the Bible does not say that God *is* the wind. In the creation account in Genesis, a wind *from* God sweeps over the waters. It is this unseen movement from God that initiates creation, and everything else follows. God expresses in the constant, dynamic, and ever-flowing relationship between all parts of creation, connecting all that is, holding everything and everyone together by invisible bonds.

God is on the move as an invisible, vibrant presence, sweeping over the depths of our lives, encouraging us to love and care for others as we learn

to love and care for ourselves. Like water seeking the lowest places, God moves to where the pain is. If we are sufficiently attuned to God's presence, we are carried along to the suffering, marginalized, and unfortunate persons along our journey for a reason – to relieve suffering and transform it for good. We (hopefully) experience this presence in return as family and friends surround us in our times of trouble, like angels appearing from God. In those caring, healing expressions, we see the face of a loving, creating, and always present God. God's movement is a continuous giving and receiving, emptying and refilling, breathing in and breathing out, undergirding everything we know in creation.

2. The Creative Voice

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.
Genesis 1:3

Many years ago, I saw an opera singer break a wine glass by holding a certain note. She sang a high, loud, sustained tone, and the glass shattered. Not an opera fan at the time, I thought maybe the glass opted to disintegrate on the spot rather than subject itself to that annoying sound. I have since realized that the *vibration* of the note was incompatible with the structure of the glass. Similarly, I remember reading that marching armies had to stop marching in time whenever crossing a bridge to prevent the bridge

from swaying uncontrollably. The vibration and power of the march could force the bridge into a destructive rhythm. Everything on earth vibrates in a certain range, and when an incompatible vibration works upon it, either the intruding vibration or the object itself must change. Most vibrations around us are outside of our conscious, perceptual range. We tend to ignore their presence and power, at least until we experience or see the results of an otherwise invisible wave, such as the destruction left by an earthquake.

We do consciously experience vibration in music, however. A string player plucks or bows a string, causing it to vibrate at a certain pitch. That vibration

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endlessly emanating from the being
of God.***

transfers to the wood, creating an audible sound. We speak and sing by forcing air across our vocal chords, causing them to vibrate in an audible way. When multiple notes vibrate in harmonious ways, we hear *chords*. When one of the notes is dissonant in relation to the others, we sense musical chaos. Our experiences around other people are similar. With some folks, we vibrate in harmony, and we enjoy their company and get along well. With others, we feel as if our relational energies are largely incompatible.

It is interesting that the Bible describes God as *speaking* creation into being. “Then God *said*, let there be...” I picture an enormous wave of energy

emanating from God, forming the shapeless earth into what has become the evolving world we know today. I suppose one could also accurately call it a *Big Bang*. To imagine a sound wave forming elements into something cohesive, we only need to watch the demonstrations of sound waves applied to sand. We see the malleable material form into designs consistent with the vibration applied, changing into shapes consistent with the creating tone. We experience this, to a degree, when a car pulls up beside us with a bass-thumping stereo. The vibration of the low frequencies penetrates our bodies such that we *feel* the sound pulsating through us as much or more than we hear it.

One of the faces of God is a creative voice vibrating through and around us, ever forming, ever healing, ever destroying and rebuilding, ever dying and being reborn. We live and move and have our being in an on-going song of creation endlessly emanating from the being of God. All of creation dances to the rhythm, seldom conscious of its divine existence or nature. When we dance in tune with the celestial beat, we experience heaven on earth wherever we are. When we fall out of time, we descend into a hell of our own making, a world of sin and separation. Fortunately for us, the invitation to rejoin the dance is always near, only a slight vibrational adjustment away.

3.

The Plurality of God

*Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image,
according to our likeness;"* Genesis 1:26a

The image of God as a stern, bearded, all-powerful, white man is primarily an invention of the West. Certainly, there are biblical references to this fearsome and narrow image of God, but when considering the references to God in their totality, it is not a very accurate picture. The name generally translated as *God* in the Bible is *Elohim*; the name translated as *Lord* in the Bible is *Adonai*. These are the two most common scriptural designations for God, and both are *plural* nouns in their original Hebrew. The significance of the plural nature of the names has been lost in time and multiple translations, as witnessed by our common assumption of God and Lord as singular beings. In addition, other references are feminine in their original Hebrew. The point is that God expresses who God is in a number of different ways and is not confined to any of them.

It should not be surprising that our One God manifests in a plurality of ways. This is true of much of creation, including us. I am a father, husband, co-worker, brother, and friend. In each of these roles, I express myself differently, even though each is a unique expression of one being. Intelligence is not a single aspect, but is a combination of intellectual, emotional, and instinctual intelligences, each expressing in unique ways and providing distinct

perspectives to a single body of knowledge. There are numerous phases to each day: sunrise, morning, noon, evening, sunset, and night. All are discrete parts of a single day.

The first biblical hint that God is a plurality occurs in Genesis 1:26, where it is written, “Then God said, Let *us* make humankind in *our* image” (emphasis added). The writing is distinctly and unmistakably *plural*. The question, then, is if God is One, who are the others? This question is often reconciled by the religious doctrine of the Trinity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In short, the Trinity identifies three *persons*, personas, or faces of the One God. I will address the Trinity later in this book, so all I will say at this point is that God appears

***The most common designations for
God in scripture are plural nouns.***

to manifest in multiple ways, but always in relation to other expressions of God or parts of creation. Whether we believe God expresses in one, three, or many different ways, it is clear to me that our One God has many faces.

The observation that God has many faces is encouraging. If our God is to be inclusive of all, and if we are all created in God’s likeness, then the being of God must include the infinite variations among all of us: all colors, all cultures, all genders, all ages, and all beliefs. That is good news for those who feel excluded from, unworthy of, or otherwise unable to access the all-inclusive love of God. In the Genesis creation story, God looks over the whole of creation and sees that it is good. We, on the other hand, look

over the whole of creation and label some parts good and some not-so-good, some righteous and some evil, some like us and some different from us. We cannot begin to know and experience the depth of God's love until we learn to see God's creation as God sees it: wonderful and beautiful in all its awesome and infinite diversity. We are an inseparable part of one world expressing in countless ways, just like the image and likeness of the One God from whom we and all of creation flow.

4. A Lonely God

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" Genesis 3:8-9

Adam and Eve are in the Garden of Eden after eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In the Garden, Adam, Eve, and God lived peaceably together with the rest of creation. After eating the forbidden fruit, they became self-conscious and felt exposed and naked. They hid from God, presumably because they were ashamed. God calls out, "Where are you?"

One question from this allegorical story is this: If God is all-knowing, as it seems safe to assume, why could God not find Adam and Eve? I remember

playing Hide & Seek when my children were young. They would hide while I counted to ten, and I *always* knew where they were hiding long before actually “finding” them. Here is where the story gets uncannily timely and personal. Perhaps the hiding done by Adam and Eve was not physical. Perhaps they were hiding their *attention* from God. Perhaps they were intentionally turning away from God. After all, our attention can only be given; it cannot be taken, not even by God.

Throughout the Bible, it is clear that God wants to be in relationship with us. An important part of any relationship is the willingness to give the other our attention. Attention is life-giving. We have all had experiences, however, when someone was physically present with us but their attention was elsewhere. In this age of smart phones and multitasking, it is common to attempt to converse with someone while they (or we) are texting or trolling someone else that is not physically present. It is annoying and inconsiderate. Sometimes, I want to ask, “Where are you?” when someone is standing in front of me but looking at their phone. Unfortunately, I return the favor too often.

What motivates us to divert our attention away from those we are with in a given moment? Are we too busy? Are we not interested? Are we easily distracted? These are common maladies with so many seductive diversions readily available that invite us out of the present moment. Adam responds to God’s question, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself” (3:10). Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the snake, and thus began the practice of scapegoating

others for our missteps. Why were they suddenly afraid of God? Adam and Eve had changed. Instead of delighting in the beauty, abundance, and divine fellowship of the garden, they began seeing everything – including themselves – as good or evil, black or white, right or wrong, naked or clothed. Neither one was comfortable in God’s presence any longer, and the extension of the story is we are still uncomfortable today. A similar discomfort led society to crucify Jesus. God calls and we turn away. While we cannot turn God’s attention away from us, we can refuse to reciprocate by withholding our attention. In doing so, we miss the love, acceptance, and grace God willingly offers. When our nakedness is exposed,

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with?***

as it necessarily must be in God’s presence, we forget about our divine kinship, and we feel ashamed. In truth, it is our innocent nakedness that God most desires to receive.

There is a modern-day fable of a person having a near-death experience. Her spirit journeys to a wonderful place where she finds herself in the presence of God. What she experiences is pure, unsullied *love*. She feels a call back to her body, however, and just before returning, she asks God if there is a message to bring back to her earthly companions. God says, “Yes, tell them I miss them.” Dare we believe that God is lonely for us?

5.

A Sorry God

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. Genesis 6:5-6

Some people believe that the story of Noah's Ark is historically accurate, meaning that the events happened as described in Genesis. Others believe the story is mythical, meaning it may not be factually correct, but rather was written to teach the reader something about God and God's relationship to man. While I respect both views, I am most interested in the Noah's Ark account for what it teaches about God, more so than what it may teach about history.

As the story goes, God looks over his early creation and sees corruption and wickedness. Humankind is behaving ways that make God sorry for creating them. God decides to destroy all living things, except for Noah and his family. From them, the human race will then be regenerated. Noah is to gather pairs of every living thing, build a huge ark to preserve this cross-section of creation, and prepare for a flood of epic proportion.

To consider that God might be sorry for something God created is inconsistent with the way I was taught to understand God. According to the story of Noah's Ark, the depravity displayed by human

beings toward each other and toward the rest of creation seemed to catch God by surprise. While the Bible does not explicitly say that God made a mistake, the story certainly makes it sound like that is the way God saw the initial creation. For me, the fact that humanity's corruption and wickedness made God sorrowful is an indication of how intimately God is involved in and cares about this creation. If that were not the case, why would God be sorry?

God did not introduce corruption and violence into our world – we did. Yet, because God experiences creation through us, corruption and

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violence break God's heart along with ours. Wickedness is a creation of the *human* mind, not God's, and yet God is victimized by it every bit as much as we are. The pinnacle of human depravity in the Bible is the crucifixion of Jesus, where humanity applies its cruelest techniques of torture to maim, humiliate, and kill the One who came to display and model divine love in human form for us.

I think there are at least three lessons we can take from the story of Noah's Ark. First, God suffers with us in our suffering, and God is involved with us in relieving that suffering. Second, just as God saw something worth saving in Noah's family, so God

sees something of value in each of us, something worth salvaging, and something that can be used to further God's work on earth. No matter how far we have fallen, how corrupted we feel, or how badly we have messed up our lives or the lives of others, God can and will redeem us. Finally, perhaps God is not all-knowing in the way we usually assume. Perhaps even God cannot predict the depths to which our free will can sink us. What we do know about God, based on Romans 8:28, is that God can and will make all things work together for good for those who believe. God works through those of us with physical bodies, however, to build the Ark that will lead us out of whatever swamp we find ourselves in.

6. A Demanding God

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt sacrifice on one of the mountains that I shall show you." Genesis 22:1-2

Abraham, the shared patriarch of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, had an encounter with God – a disturbing encounter, to say the least. Some years earlier, God had promised to make Abraham's offspring as numerous as the stars. Never mind that Abraham was 100 and his wife was 90 at the time. Sure enough, Sarah gave birth to Isaac after having

been barren. Once Isaac had grown into a young man, Abraham heard God tell him to sacrifice Isaac. Forever the obedient servant, Abraham took Isaac to a mountain, laid him on a pile of wood, and prepared to stab him to death before burning his body. As Abraham raised the knife, an angel stopped him and offered a ram in Isaac's place.

Of the many faces of God in the Bible, the one demanding the sacrifice of one's own child is among the most disturbing. It is completely inconsistent with the loving, nurturing God I experience. It makes no sense that after God promises Abraham countless descendants that Abraham would be directed to kill the one through whom those descendants would flow. The traditional moral of the story is that Abraham's faithfulness was being tested and, thus, he was proven worthy to father a great nation. While I agree that obedience and faithfulness are important, I find myself questioning whether sacrificing Isaac was actually a directive from God.

Interestingly, there are numerous passages in the Bible indicating that God does not want our sacrifices. For instance, Psalm 51:16, "For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased." Likewise, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus twice quotes Hosea 6:6, "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." Even so, offering sacrifices to atone for sin and to show one's obedience to God was a routine practice in the Old Testament.

A common thread running through Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is that of *original sin*, which is said to have occurred when Adam and Eve ate the

forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Some believe that original sin is etched into our human DNA, forever making us corrupt creatures and more deserving of God's punishment than God's love. When we believe we must earn God's blessing, we may feel the need to sacrifice something to justify the undeserved gift. Many believe they will pay a painful price for anything good that happens in their lives. Do not misunderstand me; I know it is human nature to sometimes act in ways that are inconsistent with decent behavior. Even so, why do we focus on the disobedience from a mythical story and ignore the amazing blessings God bestowed on every succeeding generation? Particularly for Christians, if we believe

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Jesus bridged the sin gap between humanity and God, why would we continue to feel we can or must earn the love God so freely gives? One would think that responses of gratitude and generosity would be more appropriate than self-denying guilt. The feelings of worthlessness – our poor self-esteem – lead us to feel the need to offer God sacrifices that God has no need or desire to receive. The sacrificial system may have derived more from our poor self-image than from God's demands.

Sometimes we simply cannot accept our good fortune. Perhaps this is what happened to Abraham. Ultimately, God had to intervene to keep Abraham from destroying the very blessing God had given to

him. We know how that is, do we not? Sometimes our subconscious guilt causes us to sabotage, or at least diminish the good in our life. When we act out of a deeply rooted sense of guilt, the outcome will not bestow blessing. When we act out of a sense of blessing, God's love flows through us to bless others. God's nature is to bless, not to punish. Our human frailties punish us sufficiently already. God is accommodating enough, however, to allow our free will to sink us to whatever depths we feel we deserve. Once we are sufficiently low, God lovingly and patiently works to help lift us out of whatever hole we find ourselves in.

God's demands are not contrary to God's blessings. Our understanding, however, may be.

7. A Wrestling God

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

Genesis 32:24-25;29c-30

Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, wrestles with God one night. Back and forth they go, apparently struggling to something of a stalemate. God strikes Jacob's hip and knocks it out of joint, but Jacob will

not let God go until he receives a blessing. God, in the person of a man, says, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed.” After the blessing, Jacob released God but then walked with a limp because of his hip. Wrestling with and receiving a blessing from God left its mark on Jacob.

As we consider the various faces under which God manifests in our world, this story is another example that refutes our typical image of God as a distant, impersonal being. Personally, I believe I *wrestle* with God on a regular basis, although in non-physical ways. For example, I struggle with how God can be a loving, involved God and still allow child abuse, starvation, and the murder of countless innocents on

***Our wrestling with God often ends with
no clear answers.***

a daily basis. (Never mind that the answer always seems to be, “How can *you* – meaning me – be a loving, involved human and allow such bad things to happen to innocents?”) It is a sometimes unwelcome reminder that we are God’s hands and feet on earth. Just as Jacob’s wrestling seems to end with no clear winner, our wrestling with God often ends with no clear answers. What occurs, instead, is a dialogue that eventually leads to new understandings, along with new questions. There is a push and pull, a give and take to interactions with God that can be frustrating for their lack of clarity, not to mention the lack of certainty that I am actually wrestling with God and not simply arguing with myself.

The thought of wrestling with God is one interesting piece of this story. Another aspect is that God came to Jacob in the person of a *man* (some translations say it was an angel). For me, this is a reminder that we, particularly those of us who hold ourselves out to be Christian, expose ourselves as representatives of God, if not God in the flesh, to others with whom we interact. I feel this most intently in my role as a father, because I know a child's image of God is often formed by their interactions with their earthly father. The point is that we always leave an impression on those we meet. It is our responsibility to assure that the impression we give is consistent with what it means to be a child of God.

Another takeaway from the story is that Jacob's wrestling with God left him with a limp. Wrestling with God should leave a mark, in that it should change us in some noticeable way. If we are left unchanged from an encounter with God, we must wonder if it was God we really encountered.

Finally, Jacob's encounter with God happened when he was alone. In our busy, hectic world, we must be intentional about dedicating alone time so God can manifest to us. This means time away from television, family members, and cell phones where we just rest in God's presence with no agenda other than to rest in God's presence. Whether we devote 5 minutes or an hour, whether it is daily or weekly, alone time is vital to our development as spiritual beings. In this sense, God is shy. God will seldom compete for our attention against the distractions of our world.

Wrestling with God changes lives, but it also leaves a mark.

8.

The Fiery Face of God

There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.” Exodus 3:2

Fire is an amazing phenomenon, almost like something outside of the rest of creation. Its sustenance requires three things: fuel, oxygen, and heat. Combining these three elements is not sufficient for a fire to actually manifest, however. There must also be an ignition source – a spark to initiate or invite the fire to begin. Fire, like electricity, is neither good nor bad; rather, fire can produce either good or bad results. Fire can heat a home, cook a meal, and provide soothing light; fire can also reduce a home to ashes or burn a person beyond recognition.

God manifests as fire in numerous places in the Bible. In Exodus, God appears to Moses as a burning bush that is not consumed by the flames. God leads the Israelites out of Egypt as a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:22). Psalm 29:7 proclaims, “The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.” The New Testament author of Hebrews writes, “...for indeed our God is a consuming fire” (12:29). You get the picture: one of the faces of God is *fire*.

The ancient science of *Alchemy* used fire to purify metals like gold and silver. The art of the practice was to apply the right amount of heat to a substance in order to burn away the impurities without consuming

the precious metal. Considering alchemy in an allegorical sense, God is the divine alchemist applying fire to us in order to burn away that which is unhelpful in us. The difficult, challenging, and painful times of our lives can be seen as a divine torch, burning away our narcissism, humbling us, and sometimes driving us to our knees in a cry for mercy. While I do not believe God rains hard times down upon us – we do that to ourselves – I do believe God takes what remains and stands ready to remake us

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anew. In the sense that one of the faces of God is fire, that fire is a resurrecting fire. Unfortunately, some measure of destruction is necessary for resurrection to occur, so the initial phases of the rebirthing process often feel more like a punishing fire from hell.

A legendary bird, the *Phoenix*, was said to live until reaching a certain stage of decline when it would simply burst into flame, reducing itself to ashes, only to rise again as a new creation from those very ashes. It is a mythical example of the pervasive cycle of life: birth, growth, decline, death, and rebirth. A more down to earth example occurs annually in the Flint Hills of Kansas, which are burned to black stubble every spring, only to be reborn to an iridescent green a short time later. The centuries-old practice of prairie burning purges the old growth, replenishes the

nutrients in the ground, and clears the way for the rebirth of the prairie.

The analogy of God manifesting as fire assures us that our God is not an emotionless bystander. Fire is symbolic of passion and action. God's love for us is fierce and tenacious. We do not consciously experience the fiery love of God because we are seldom in a state of sufficient awareness to recognize it. Regardless, God's love burns brightly for each of us. The creator in God recycles all the elements of the earth in a never-ending dance of recreation, molding new combinations and rebirthing the old. Nothing is wasted, ever – no experience, no element, no being. When necessary, God manifests as a consuming fire, forcing the old to release the elements of its construction in order to allow a new creation to enter.

9. A Beingless Being

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." Exodus 3:13-14a

It may seem odd to discuss God as a *beingless being* in a book about the *Faces of God*. The following will sound more like a discussion of a *faceless* God. In fact, that is exactly what I intend to convey. The reader will have to wade through the obscure language, as I

know of no other way to communicate this foundational, undefinable persona of God.

A *being* implies someone who can be known, described, and even predicted, at least to an extent. Human beings can be known, at least to a degree that is usually comfortable. Even though human beings are created in the image of God, the opposite cannot be completely true. The only place where we know God is created in the image of human beings is in the minds of humans; and that God is but the limited image of a limitless being. God, as Spirit, enters and animates all living creatures, including us. Father Richard Rohr, in his daily devotion for April 2, 2017, writes, “Spirit is forever captured in matter, and matter is the place where Spirit shows itself.”⁴ God has no visible, tangible, physical being except in and through God’s creation. In the book of Exodus, God speaks to Moses through a burning bush on top of a mountain. The people below see only dark clouds and lightening and hear only thunder. When Moses asks for God’s name to share with the Israelites, God says, “I am who I am.” The Israelites wanted to *know* God as a being like themselves, but God refused to be known in such a limited way.

All attempts to know or name God ultimately fall short, because once we have given something a name or description, we have limited its being. While we are more comfortable with that which we can describe, God resists confinement to any limited form. God assumes an infinite number of faces. None of these *faces* exposes the entirety of God, but all of them provide glimpses into God’s unfathomable nature. Above all, God is mysterious. Thus, God is a beingless being – God cannot be known as we know

another person, the trees of the forest, or the ingredients for our favorite casserole. In this sense, God remains distant from our conscious understanding. Yet, God lives and experiences through us, so God is also closer than our next breath. When we look at the infinite variety and diversity in nature, and when we understand that God expresses in every part of creation, we begin to imagine the incomprehensible vastness of God's beingless being.

God is a God of endless possibilities, not an unchangeable rock. Of course, even rocks change over time. Even mountains crumble. Rivers change course. Our limited experience of time makes some

The Israelites wanted to know God as a being like themselves, but God refused to be known in such a limited way.

things of the earth appear eternal, but that is simply not true in the context of eternity. If there is a constant quality to God, it is that God is constantly changing, shifting, and forever creating new tapestries of being. God shepherds all of creation through the on-going process of birth, growth, death, and rebirth, ever transforming everything into something new. Being less, being more, simply being.

God will be what God will be.

10.

The Hidden Face of God

Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire. Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. Exodus 19:18,19b

There is a stark contrast between the God presented in the first three chapters of Genesis and the God described in the rest of the Old Testament. In the Garden of Eden, God was present with Adam, Eve, and the rest of creation. They walked and talked together as people in relationships do. Once Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden, God seemingly became distant and mysterious. Leading the Israelites out of Egypt, God manifested as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. As God prepared to give Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, the people below heard only thunder and saw only fire and smoke. Psalm 13:1 asks, “How long will you hide your face from me?” The question arises, “Did God leave direct relationship with creation, or did creation leave direct relationship with God?” How one answers that question has a lot to do with how one views his or her connection with God. If we see God as a distant, aloof being, we are likely to believe God put the distance between us, presumably because of the *original sin* committed in the Garden. If we see God as a constant, involved presence in our lives, however, we are more likely to believe we separate ourselves from God. Personally, I believe the latter.

Humankind has developed a collective and tenacious inferiority complex. Perhaps we are taught from an early age that we are not worthy of God's presence, that God cannot possibly love us as we are. We believe we must first go to church more often, read our Bibles more frequently, or pray more regularly. While these may be worthy goals, I do not believe God monitors our religious activities like a cosmic scorekeeper. God is interested in the content of our heart; God knows our hearts and resides there, whether or not we acknowledge it. To the extent there is distance between us and God, the distance is maintained by us, and it is completely illusory. Because of our free will, we can choose to withdraw

***The hidden face of God is hidden by
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our conscious attention from whatever we wish, even when the object of our inattention is right beside us. We are most comfortable keeping some distance from God, thus making God seem distant and aloof. It is convenient, but wrong, to say God withdrew from us. It lets us off the hook for being so self-centered when we claim God is not involved in or aware of the details of our daily lives. Of course, our feelings of unworthiness make us fear that if we reach out to God, God will not reach back. Why would God care about a lowly sinner like me?

The hidden face of God is hidden by our own fear of consciously allowing God a prominent presence in our lives. Interestingly, the Bible says that

God wanted *all* the Israelites to come up the mountain with Moses, but they were afraid – they felt unworthy. They remained below and saw only fire and heard only thunder. We should understand this, because we are guilty of the same thing. We keep our distance from conscious encounters with God by making our religion an intellectual exercise instead of an experiential communion. As such, we turn to God and see only fire and smoke. We hide behind words, creeds, tithes, and even prayers. It is as if we believe there is a threshold of religious activity that, once met, will make us worthy of God's love – but it is a threshold we can never attain. While there is nothing wrong with our religious practices, they cannot close the gap between us and God. God will remain a mystery to us until we surrender our poor self-image and embrace the image in whom we were created.

The hidden face of God longs to be unmasked.

11. A Militant God

Then Israel made a vow to the Lord and said, "If you will indeed give this people into our hands, then we will utterly destroy their towns." The Lord listened to the voice of Israel, and handed over the Canaanites; and they utterly destroyed them and their towns. Numbers 21:2-3

There is a militant face of God that appears in the Old Testament where God seemingly participates in the destruction of an enemy. Sometimes God

participates as the destroyer, where other times God empowers the army of one nation to overthrow another. In the passage from Numbers 21, God is asked to “give this people into our hands,” which means to wipe them out. Because the Israelites defeated the Canaanites in this particular battle, God received credit for the carnage. Stories like these turn some people, particularly those with a pacifist bent, away from the Old Testament.

I, too, find the thought that God might actually take sides in a physical battle troubling. (I am also bothered by people who pray for their team’s victory in a sporting event.) My concern centers around two

***What troubles me is the implication
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annihilation of a human life God
created.***

issues. First, I believe all people are created in the image of God and are loved by God as such. Second, the image of a militant God is inconsistent with the uncompromisingly non-violent persona of God embodied as Jesus the Christ in the New Testament.

While I realize the Bible was written from the perspective of the Israelites, I find the idea that God’s support or displeasure was revealed in the outcome of a war difficult to accept. Especially considering that in addition to the normal butchery of warfare, the women and children of the defeated group were often killed or enslaved. This is not to mention the plundering of everything of value. It seems that

“winning” was not sufficient, but that total annihilation was somehow justified. When the Israelites were defeated in battle, the biblical authors attributed it to God’s “punishment” for their insolence. What troubles me is the implication that God would somehow participate in the annihilation of a human life God created and called good. I understand that our human sin separates us from God, but I believe God reaches out to us in our sin to pull us back, rather than brutally snuffing the life out of the sinner.

The Old Testament portrayals of God leading a nation into battle is, to me, contrary to the life of Jesus, God’s embodiment in human form. Jesus’ life was a model of non-violence. In his final human act on earth, he submitted to the violent and deadly actions of his captors. He allowed himself to be falsely accused, humiliated, beaten, and nailed to a cross. Surely, if there was a time for God to intervene in a violent way on behalf of innocent life, that would have been it. Instead of portraying a militant face of God, however, Jesus manifested a vulnerable, submissive face. He held up a mirror for humanity to view its own cruelty and inhumanity. Perhaps God was waiting for one of us to intervene...

Fortunately, I believe there are other ways to interpret the violence recorded in the Bible. We can read biblical stories literally and as historical documents, *and* we can also understand them allegorically. Perhaps the battles documented in the Bible represent the battles that go on inside of us. I know I am forever trying to “defeat” or “annihilate” something in myself that is detrimental to my life and the lives around me. I, like many of us, worship the

idols of wealth, power, and possession, covet what belongs to my neighbor, and attempt to establish God in my own image instead of allowing God's image to shape me. It is a constant combat to overcome my human frailties, and that is a battle I could see God taking sides in. By the way, I am all for praying before a sporting event, as long as the prayer is for the participants to show respect to their opponent and to act in ways that honor their status as children of God.

God does not seek destruction as much as the transformation of a curse into a blessing. That is a militant face of God I can rally behind.

12. A Listening God

Then the Lord appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him: "I have heard your prayer...If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

2 Chronicles 7:12a,b,14

There was a movie in the 1970's called, "Oh God!"⁵ George Burns was God, in the person of a spry, elderly, outspoken gentleman. John Denver was an inquisitive, young assistant manager in a supermarket with a lot of uncertainty about life, strife, and God's role in the world. John Denver's character, over the course of the movie, grew fond of God and gained new perspectives on life. As God

walked away at the end of the movie, John Denver's character called out, "Wait a minute, what if I want to just talk to you sometime?" God answered, "You talk, I'll listen." And then God disappeared from view.

The "You talk, I'll listen" theme is one I suspect many of us experience when it comes to God. We can never be certain that God is listening, however, except by faith. We hope that is the case, although our prayers seem to be answered in such haphazard ways, it is difficult to know if God actually listens. Sometimes, when God answers our prayer in a way different than we desire, we wonder if God's hearing is faulty. The Israelites experienced the same uncertainty. Through the many challenges during

Our prayers seem to be answered in such haphazard ways, it is difficult to know if God actually listens.

their time of bondage in Egypt, through the exile, and even after they finally arrived in the Promised Land, they complained that God was not listening to their cries for help.

In 2 Chronicles, God sets out conditions for the Israelites under which God was willing to listen: humble themselves, pray, seek God, and turn from their wicked ways. Rather than making pious demands, I suspect God was giving instructions for how to become sufficiently spiritually attuned to experience God working in the world. If the people remained arrogant, trusting in their own powers, living only for themselves, they simply would not be in a personal state to know God's presence. It was

not a matter of God withholding anything from them, but a matter of their ability to recognize what God was willingly offering them. Some things do not change over the centuries...

The “You talk, I’ll listen,” motif lays a solid foundation for many friendships, counseling sessions, and marriages. I must constantly remind myself that when someone shares something that is troubling him or her, that person seldom wants me to solve a problem for them. Many of us cannot gain clarity on what is bothering us until we talk it out. Once we have contained the problem in words, we sometimes find there is either no solution needed or that there is no actual problem after all. Often, allowing a person to frame the issue verbally is *all* they need from me. Anything more is not only unhelpful, but it can be harmful to the relationship. The day my father died, my best friend came and sat with me as I wept. He did not say anything, because there was nothing worthwhile to be said. I did not need to hear that everything would be all right, that God must have needed my dad in heaven, that I would see him again in the afterlife, or that I would feel better in a few days or weeks. I needed to grieve. He listened as I talked and made sure I did not suffer alone.

Sometimes, what we most need is for someone to simply listen to us without judgement, without offering advice, and without trivializing what is weighing heavily on our minds. God always has a willing and ready listening ear.

13.

A Gambling God

“You have blessed the work of (Job’s) hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” The Lord said to Satan, “Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!” Job 1:10b-12

God and Satan are having a discussion. God points to Job as a faithful servant. Satan argues that Job is only faithful because God has blessed him so richly, and if those riches were removed from him, Job would curse God to God’s face. God takes the bet and allows Satan power over Job’s possessions. Thus begins a series of misfortunes that would make the most fatalistic pessimist cringe.

First, there is the theft and destruction of all of his livestock, followed by the murder of his servants. Next, his sons and daughters are killed when a great wind strikes their house and causes it to collapse. Job responds, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” (1:21) Satan then causes great sores to cover Job’s entire body. In his misery, Job says, “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” (2:10) Next, three of Job’s friends turn on him, arguing that it is because of his own sin, wickedness, and refusal to admit his wrongdoing that he is being punished. Job complains mightily to God about the unfairness of his situation, but does not

break faith or curse God. In a divine showdown, an unrepentant God humbles Job by reminding him of God's unfathomable power and Job's vast ignorance. Finally, God restores Job's riches to a level twice what he had before, giving him ten more children, and allowing him to live to see his great-grandchildren.

The story of Job raises a number of ethical questions about God. Why would God associate with Satan? Are women, children, and servants no more than property that can be murdered and then replaced

***The gambling God presented in Job
seems arrogant, careless, and
insensitive.***

with other women, children, and servants? Would God intentionally allow Satan – or anyone else – to destroy the life of a faithful person just to make a point? The gambling God presented in Job seems arrogant, careless, and insensitive.

Job's story, whether we read it as factual or allegorical, raises the age-old question: *Why do bad things happen to good people?* Although not to the magnitude of Job, we all know good people who seem terribly unlucky. Many of us have experienced extended misfortune, too. We find ourselves asking, "Why?" One of Job's answers is that if everything comes to us from God, everything can be taken away – whether by God, fate, genetics, or random events. There is no amount of money, health, or other earthly resource sufficient to provide an impenetrable security against the endless variety of calamities that occur every day on earth. Tornados, floods, famine,

stock market crashes, medical bills – all can wipe out our possessions quickly. While I do not believe God is the cause of our misfortune, the bottom line is that, like Job, any one of us can become destitute very quickly. Job, however, did not just lose his possessions; he also lost his relationships – his family was killed, and his friends turned against him. Of course, we lose people in our lives, too. People who are near and dear to us are here one day, then gone the next. Some die; others decide they no longer value a relationship with us. Life can be sad and unfair.

The grace in the story of Job, as in our lives, is that there is no hole so deep that God will not crawl down with us and help us find our way to sunlight, again. In his devotional, *A Spring Within Us*,⁶ Fr. Richard Rohr writes, “Like water, grace seeks the lowest place and there it pools.” Job felt unfairly abandoned, and in the hardest times of our lives, we do too. Grace, however, finds us in our darkness and eventually leads us back to the light.

Did a gambling God cause Job’s misfortune? Does a gambling God cause our misery? I do not believe so, but I do know our loving God can restore meaning and treasure to any life that has lost both.

14. The Good Shepherd

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s

sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me. Psalm 23:1-4

Some may believe the image of God as a shepherd is trite or out of date. I disagree. In fact, I believe God taking on the face and role of a shepherd is one of the most meaningful and insightful analogies about God's relationship to us. The first line of the 23rd Psalm says, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." As we better understand God and God's workings with and through us, we realize that most of us seldom *lack* anything we actually need, certainly not for extended periods. We often *desire* more than we have, but that is another issue entirely. Obviously, there are parts of the world, including in the United States, where there are people who lack necessities like sufficient food and shelter. I believe God, the good shepherd, attempts to take care of those needs by encouraging the rest of us to share our abundance to help meet those needs. A shepherd does not feed the sheep; a shepherd leads the sheep to where food is available.

My mother raised sheep as a teenager, and I remember her telling me how dumb they were. Her experience was that if they were not watched constantly, they would invent trouble to fall into. It was as if the sheep simply trusted that a shepherd was watching over them at all times, protecting them from life's perils, regardless of what they did. (Perhaps sheep are not dumb, just faithful.) The third verse of the 23rd Psalm comes to mind, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are

with me...” According to mom, her sheep would mindlessly wander into any dark valley available.

I tend to think of shepherds as necessary in open fields, where there is no fencing to keep the sheep contained within a certain area. Of course, it is still possible for sheep to find themselves in trouble in a confined area, but it limits the possibilities. The point is that the days of the shepherd being physically present with the sheep 24 hours a day, at least on modern farms, are probably over.

Even contained within a fenced field, and even with regular access to food and water, sheep can find themselves in danger. Coyotes and other predatory animals love nothing better than fresh lamb chops, and fences alone will not keep predators from easy

A good shepherd protects sheep from dangers that are naturally present.

access to the sheep. This is perhaps where the image of God as our shepherd becomes more meaningful. A shepherd does not *create* the dangers for the sheep, any more than God creates dangers for us. Danger is inherent in the world around us. A shepherd seeks to protect the sheep from the dangers that are naturally present. When danger cannot be avoided, however, a good shepherd stands *with* the sheep so they do not have to face the danger alone. While God may not physically intervene between us and threats, God does remain with us throughout the danger. As I hinted earlier, God also relies on us to help care for God’s sheep. In John 21, Jesus asks Peter if he loves him. Peter answers, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” Jesus’ answer? “Tend my sheep.” Understanding God

as our shepherd does not imply that God is or needs to be physically present with us. It does mean, however, that God inspires others to help in our time of need, just as God encourages us to help others in our times of abundance. We are, after all, the hands and feet of a very good shepherd.

15. A Merciful God

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my
sin. Psalm 51:1-2*

If there were a *Golden Boy* in the Bible – the high school jock blessed with athletic ability, good looks, confidence, popularity, and who could seemingly do no wrong (even when doing wrong) – it would be David. He was perhaps the king of all sinners in the Bible, and yet God used him in mighty ways. There is no greater example of God's unfailing mercy than in the story of David.

In the 11th chapter of 2 Samuel we find King David on the roof of his palace. He observed a very beautiful woman, Bathsheba, bathing on the roof of her home. David sent for and slept with her. Bathsheba became pregnant, posing an embarrassing problem since her husband, Uriah, was away fighting one of David's wars. In a lame attempt to make it look like the baby was Uriah's, David had Uriah leave

the battle and come home to his wife. Uriah, troubled by the fact that he was home and his fellow soldiers were not, refused to sleep with his wife and returned to the battle. David ordered that Uriah be sent to the front of the battle where he would most certainly be killed. Uriah died, freeing Bathsheba for David to take as his wife. In a relatively short period of time, David used his position and power to commit adultery and murder. The cowboy philosopher of the last century, Will Rogers⁷, said, “When you find yourself in a hole, stop digging.” Unfortunately for David, that sage advice came a few thousand years too late.

Psalm 51 was written by David sometime after these events as his way of seeking God’s mercy for his despicable behavior. The Psalm provides sage insight into the merciful face of God, as well as how we can experience it. First and foremost is that contrition is internal. This may seem obvious, but too often, even in biblical times, we prefer to make amends outside of ourselves through sacrifices and other methods that only serve to mask the demons lurking within us. Until those demons are exposed, however, we keep digging ourselves into the same holes. In Psalm 51:17, David writes, “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a *broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart.*” If our transgressions do not break something inside of us, opening us to new understandings, building a desire for change, and teaching us new ways to behave, we cannot receive God’s mercy. If we are not sufficiently willing to allow God to change us from within, God’s love and mercy towards us will never *stick*. It is not that God withholds mercy from us as much as we are not in a state to receive it.

In Psalm 51:6, David writes, “You desire truth in my *inward being*, therefore *teach me wisdom in my secret heart*.” Likewise, in verse 10, “Create in me *a clean heart*, O God, and put a new and right spirit *within me*.” Wisdom is internal, and we must open ourselves – make space –for it to enter. In the New Testament, this is called *repentance*, or turning ourselves around.

I believe we suffer, collectively, from a poor self-image. Either we forget, or we are afraid to believe the image and likeness from which we were created. We feel unworthy to receive the mercy of God because we focus on our sin instead of our destiny. We forget that we are always in a process of *growing toward* our destiny, our union with God. In God’s

***It is not that God withholds mercy
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a state to receive it.***

eyes, our sins are not so much evil as they are growing pains. Every child falls many times before he or she attains the ability to walk confidently and competently. We do not think less of them for their clumsiness; we lovingly help them back up.

In spite of his numerous human frailties, David went on to become Israel’s most celebrated and beloved leader. While David and Bathsheba’s first child died young, they had another son, Solomon, who became another accomplished and treasured leader for Israel. If God showed mercy to one displaying the *growing pains* of David, how much more must God be willing to show mercy to us? And, as

God shows mercy to us, how much more should we show mercy to each other?

16. The Timeless One

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals." For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night. Psalm 90:1-4

I had a revealing dream several years after my father's death. He died suddenly, early on a December morning, when I was 14. In the years that followed, a series of dreams haunted me where I knew he was present, but just out of sight. I would run to where he was, but by the time I got there, he would be gone. The revealing dream was this: My sister and I were looking out the front window of our home when I saw dad park the car and get out with a bag of groceries – and then I woke up (in more ways than one). The dream told me that one day, the years without my father will seem no more significant than the time apart from a trip to the grocery store. The reason this is true is that our experience of the passage of time is but a moment in the context of eternity.

Psalm 90 equates a thousand years to yesterday. Likewise, 2 Peter 3:8 tells us: "...with the Lord one

day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.” God time is not the same as human time. Here is a way we can perhaps visualize how this is possible. If we were two-dimensional beings – experiencing life only through height and width – we could only experience the third dimension (depth) in time. In other words, in any given moment we could see above and below, side to side, but not front or behind. We would only be able to experience moving forward or backward via the passage of time. To us now, as three-dimensional beings, it is clear what lies immediately ahead for our two-dimensional friends because we can perceive all three dimensions at once. As the theory goes, we experience the next dimension

***Our experience of the passage of time
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eternity.***

beyond our physical reality in time. The question is this: What is the nature of the fourth dimension that we can only experience in time? When freed of our three-dimensionality, what expanded reality will be revealed to us, in the same way that depth appears to a two-dimensional being? I believe this is at the heart of our quandary, that our earth-bound perception is limited to three-dimensionality, and the mysterious reality beyond our experience unfolds for us in time.

The creation story in Genesis records that God created the earth and everything in it in six days. Some Christians believe creation occurred in 6 twenty-four hour periods, probably less than 10,000 years ago. Many scientists believe the creation

occurred with a Big Bang about 13.8 billion years ago. For me, the question of which timeframe is correct is irrelevant and unanswerable because time for the creator – the Timeless One – is inconceivable to us.

Albert Einstein proved, mathematically, that time is relative and not absolute. In other words, time is not a precise measurement that exists independent of our observation of it. In fact, in his later years, Einstein concluded⁸ that past, present, and future exist simultaneously in the fourth dimension, which he labeled as *time-space*. The point is this: Time, as we experience it, is only accurate in a limited way and for a limited cross-section of reality. When we are freed from the limitations of the earth-bound portion of our lives, the spans of decades, centuries, and eons will seem no longer than a trip to the grocery store.

All of this is to say that there is both biblical and scientific evidence that time is not as we believe, nor is the world we experience the entirety of everything created. Our lives are one part of an eternal creation that stretches from before our birth to beyond our physical death, when we will rejoin the Timeless One in an existence beyond earth-time.

17. A God of Vengeance

*O Lord, you God of vengeance, you God of vengeance, shine
forth! Psalm 94:1*

A jealous and avenging God is the Lord, the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and rages against his enemies. Nahum 1:2

There was a distinct face of vengeance put upon God in parts of the Old Testament. God was often portrayed as a great punisher, one who would discipline those who did wrong and help gain revenge against those who offended or harmed God's *chosen people*. Early faith was expressed in the belief in a vengeful God who punished those who behaved in ways that the scriptures or cultural norms defined as wrong. In the mostly tribal cultures of the Middle East, past and present, the people sought an advantage over other tribes, and the God of Israel was rendered as the difference-maker who would give the faithful an edge over the idol-worshiping infidels next door.

While we all want to believe God is on our side, and I believe that is an accurate assumption, it behooves us to carefully examine whether *our side* represents something that is Godly in nature. Would God really show preference for one group of people over those of other nations, religions, sexual orientations, or races? Granted, the Israelites claimed themselves as the chosen people of God, but was that actually played out in the Bible? It is clear to me that the Israelites had a *relationship* with God, which does not appear to have meant that God was willing to serve as a secret weapon against their enemies. Clearly, the Israelites were looking for security, and the face of God they felt they needed was one willing to be vengeful. God, however, seemed to have a different concept about what provided security.

When I compare the faces of God on display in the Old Testament with the face of God manifest in Jesus the Christ in the New Testament, I find some of the differences hard to reconcile. The prophet Nahum describes God as “jealous and avenging,” “wrathful,” and “rag(ing) against his enemies.” I find no similar traits in Jesus. The only people Jesus consistently showed displeasure with were the scribes and Pharisees – the religious elite who followed the letter of the law while dismissing the spirit in which it was given. His annoyance was reserved for those whose teachings were false or misleading to others (which should be a warning to those of us who pretend to any level of spiritual understanding).

***What if God simply allows us to
experience and learn from the natural
consequences of our own decisions?***

Otherwise, Jesus was non-violent and accepting of all – no jealousy, no vengeance, no wrath, no exclusion. Only love. Even on his final night on earth, as Peter drew a knife to protect him from the Temple police, Jesus told him to put away his sword because “all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52).

Sir Isaac Newton’s third law of physics⁹ states, “For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.” In many tribal cultures, the norm is that you are either the attacker or the attacked. Little wonder that we see power passed back and forth, within and between succeeding generations. Could it be that the Israelites of old were simply experiencing

the yet-to-be-named third law of physics? They would attack another nation and win. Another nation would attack them and Israel would lose. When they won, they praised their vengeful God for leading them to victory. When they lost, they attributed it to God's punishment for their infidelity. What if God was neither helping nor hindering them in their violent exploits? What if God was simply allowing them to experience and learn from the natural consequences of their own decisions?

Clearly, it is difficult for me to reconcile the person of Jesus with a violent, vengeful God. As we switch focus from the faces of the God of the Old Testament to the faces of God in the New Testament, it will become clear that, in the end, God's face is one of mercy and forgiveness. I have to wonder if the vengeful face of God is a face created by us in our own image.

18.

The Master Craftsman

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes beheld my unmade substance. In your book was written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. Psalm 139:13-16

For most goods and services today, variation in the end product is considered undesirable. Companies spend enormous sums of money each year to reduce variation in how they do what they do in order to make everything they produce as identical as possible. Reducing variation in goods and services leads to consistency, predictability, and reliability. Earlier in my healthcare leadership career, I actually taught people how to measure the variation in their performance by using statistical control charts. In that way, they could identify sources of variation in their work and strive to reduce those to a minimum. It is the path our world uses to approach what we consider *perfection*, but it is a perfection defined more by functional characteristics than by aesthetic qualities.

The goal of a production line – whether it is producing new cars, vacuum cleaners, or hamburgers – is to produce as much as possible, as consistently as possible, and as efficiently (meaning profitably) as possible. That is the reason we can buy a Happy Meal at McDonald's anywhere in the country and expect it to look and taste the same as a Happy Meal anywhere else. The same is true for a Ford Fusion or a Samsung television. In general, we value predictability and consistency whenever functionality is the goal.

Mass production of essentially identical products is a wonderful thing for both consumers and producers in a capitalistic society. It is also 180° different from the way God creates. Based on the evidence everywhere around us, God places great value on variation. Nature is much less predictable and reliable than a Taylor guitar, and individual human behavior is nearly impossible to predict. For

example, we have two genetically identical Red Maple trees planted 30 feet apart in our backyard, yet they have grown into very dissimilar manifestations of their *red-mapleness*. The point is that God is a master craftsman, not a production line foreman. A production foreman forces the materials at his or her disposal to conform to the product design demanded. A master craftsman, on the other hand, alters the product design to accommodate the unique traits of the material at hand. No two creations of an artisan will be identical. Of the roughly seven billion people alive on the planet today, no two are identical. No two people in history have been identical creations, not to mention no two trees, blades of grass,

***Based on the evidence everywhere
around us, God places great value on
variation.***

snowflakes, sunsets, rocks, or any other created things – nor will they ever be. Psalm 139 describes how God made us and knows us “in (our most) inward parts.” God’s knowledge of us is not general or collective; God’s knowledge of us is specific, personal, and intimate. To the extent that God has a plan for us, that plan will be perfectly suited to our God-given nature and never something that forces us against the natural grain of our being. God recognizes and revels in our uniqueness. While the Bible often calls us to be united with each other (John 17, for example), it does not demand uniformity among us. In God’s creative scheme, uniformity is akin to blasphemy.

One of the many faces of God is that of a Master Craftsman. I picture the weathered, kindly face of a sculptor whose sole focus and loving attention is rapturously held on every detail of his or her creation. How is this possible, we wonder? For some questions, it is best to live in the grace of the reality than to worry about what may not seem possible.

19. An Inclusive God

So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Jonah 1:15,17

The story of Jonah shows a face of God that will manifest fully in the New Testament in the person of Jesus – a face of inclusion. The prophet Jonah was told by the Lord to go to Nineveh and warn the people to change their wicked ways. Jonah did not want to go because Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, a country that had long dominated Jonah's homeland, leaving Jonah's people bitter. Jonah did *not* want to go to Nineveh carrying the Lord's message of salvation because Jonah did not like the people of Nineveh. He would have preferred that the Lord destroy them for their past trespasses, instead of providing another chance through the warning of a reluctant prophet.

As the story goes, Jonah received his instructions to head east to Nineveh; instead, he boarded a ship headed west to Tarshish, fleeing from the Lord. While Jonah slept below deck, the Lord caused a great storm to hit the ship, threatening to break it apart. The crew, frantic to save their lives and their ship, confronted their run-away passenger. Jonah confessed that God was causing the storm because of his disobedience. He told the crew that throwing him overboard would calm the seas. Eventually, the crew threw Jonah over

All beings are precious, loved, and worthy of redemption, regardless of what the Jonah's among us believe.

the side, and the seas grew calm. A large fish swallowed Jonah, and he spent three days in its belly before being spit up onto dry land. The Lord, again, tells Jonah to go to Nineveh. This time he goes and tells the people to turn from their wicked ways. Much to Jonah's likely chagrin, the people repented and God saved them from destruction.

Trying to hide from God is never a successful strategy, at least not in the Bible. Beginning in Genesis with Adam and Eve trying to hide from God in the Garden of Eden, many different characters try to hide from God in various ways, but they never succeed. I catch myself trying to hide from God sometimes, although I am old enough to know better. Anytime I say or do something that I know is inconsistent with the way Jesus lived – something selfish or harmful to others – a part of me hopes God does not notice. I can be a narcissistic person, and I

believe God provides me with opportunities daily to help me become more other-focused. It is those opportunities from which I often try to hide or ignore.

Jonah's preference was that the people of Nineveh should die in their sin. He felt that was what they deserved. God, however, is an inclusive and persistent God of grace. This God is portrayed by Jesus as the good shepherd who leaves his flock of 99 to save one wayward sheep who has wandered astray (Matthew 18:12-14). This is the same God that in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), throws a huge party in celebration of the return of his long, lost son. God rejoices when any lost child (regardless of age) is brought back into the fold. We humans are quick to judge, and we are quick to label others as good or evil, Christian or non-Christian, right or wrong. God, however, sees beyond our dualistic categorizing to the heart of a being created in God's likeness. All are precious, loved, and worthy of redemption, regardless of what the Jonah's among us believe.

When we try to hide from God's calling, we often find ourselves in a dark and lonely place. We are given time to reconsider our actions – thankfully, not in the belly of a fish – and we are always given another chance for more inclusive behavior. God's patience is infinite, but God's persistence is relentless.

An inclusive God is calling. What and who are we excluding?

Part 2

New Testament Faces

20.

An Intimate and Personal Gaze

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean." Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. Mark 1:40-42

The portrayals of God in the Old Testament are largely *impersonal*. Readers can come away with an image of God as distant from, inaccessible to, and unapproachable by the majority of humanity. Personal relationships with God seemed to be reserved for a select few. It is a familiar structure because many churches give the same impression with their organizational hierarchies. The pastors, bishops, and cardinals are often assumed to be more connected to God than others are. Although most of these people receive formal training *about* the Bible, God, and matters of the church, their relationship *to* and *with* God is no more exclusive than that for anyone else.

Unlike the God of the Old Testament, God in Jesus communed intimately with many different individuals on a very personal level – not just the upper class, the religious elite, or the societal leaders, but with regular, everyday, run-of-the-mill folks like

you and me, including many considered undesirable by society. The Gospels are full of stories of masses of individuals seeking out Jesus for healing, and he willingly accommodated as many as possible. In the passage from Mark, a person with leprosy approaches Jesus and acknowledges that Jesus has the power to make him clean, *if Jesus so chooses*. Jesus does choose and frees the person from his disease.

There was a significant event documented in Matthew (27:51) and Luke (23:45) as Jesus died on the cross that symbolizes God's personal openness to us. The curtain of the Temple, whose sole purpose was to keep the worshipers separate from their impersonal God, was torn in two. This tearing of the curtain symbolized the removal of a barrier to our direct access to God. This was one of the messages of Jesus – that God is the God of *all* of us, individually and collectively, and that God is accessible to everyone.

Many of us are reluctant to believe in a personal God. It defies logic. Indeed, I believe we miss the personal nature of God because we tend to learn *about* God in our head instead of *experiencing* God in our heart. Intellectual knowledge about anything does not lead to a deeply personal experience. Further, since we can only know God by faith, some find belief in a familiar God a leap too far. We feel unworthy, or we believe God is too big, too busy, or too important to care about us in our individual quirkiness. God came to earth in Jesus, though, precisely to be in direct relationship with individuals. Although the person of Jesus died 2000 years ago, that personal face of God remains connected to us through the Spirit whether or not we are aware of it. What is hard to accept, what

seems too good to be true is that God knows and loves us in our entire individual idiosyncrasy. Those who are parents love their children for their unique traits, even when they disappoint or annoy us. Why would we expect less from our divine parent?

The personal nature of God is important. We know from our other relationships that it is difficult to dislike a person we know well. Once we get to know a person, once there is a trusted, mutual vulnerability between us, we cannot help but appreciate who they are, where they have been in life, and their hopes and dreams for the future. Indeed, knowing someone in much of their specificity is a

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prerequisite to deeply loving them. It seems to follow, then, that for God to love us, God must know us in a detailed and specific way. That love is the source of our inestimable worth, for if God knows us in all our particulars and still loves us, who else's opinion could possibly matter? When we seek the face of God with our heart, an intimate and personal gaze gazes back.

21.

The Face of Calm

He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Mark 4:39-41

When we think about the faces of God shown by Jesus, we must consider the face of calm. Many times in the Gospels, Jesus tells his followers not to be afraid. This is consistent with the numerous Old Testament writings where those having an encounter with God or angels were told not to be afraid. When something well out of the ordinary occurs, one natural reaction is fear. If I were to come across a bush that was burning and not being consumed, I would be curious. If and when that bush began speaking to me, I would probably be afraid. In the passage from Mark 4, Jesus is crossing the sea with his disciples. Jesus falls asleep and a great windstorm hits, threatening to swamp their boat. The disciples are terrified and wake Jesus up, accusing him of not caring that they are about to drown. Jesus tells the wind and the sea to be still, and they obey. He then turns to his disciples and says, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Tying fear and a lack of faith together is profound and an often-overlooked connection. Did

Jesus think it was not appropriate for the disciples to be afraid when the waves were crashing over the sides of their boat? Was he criticizing them for their lack of faith in his ability to keep them safe? Did he think they should not be afraid to die for his ministry? These questions are not answered in the Gospel story, but there are other ways to understand the story aside from a literal reading.

If we look at the chaos from the windstorm as a metaphor for the chaos sometimes caused by the circumstances in our lives, the story takes on a very personal meaning. When I work myself into a frenzied state over something that may or may not happen in the future, when I become frustrated with

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traffic, or when I feel shame over something I did or said in the past, I can almost hear Jesus whispering over my shoulder, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” The most obvious answer, whenever I succumb to these manifestations of fear, is that my faith is very small. I have lived far long enough to experience problems being solved – stormy seas being calmed – in ways I could never have imagined and that clearly were initiated by a power beyond anything I am capable of exerting.

There are several elements to this story. The first is that Jesus displayed power over the wind and sea. That, in itself, would cause both fear and wonder. Indeed, the disciples respond, “Who then is this, that

even the wind and the sea obey him?” Perhaps they were still uncertain about the divine nature of Jesus, or even unaware of what a divine being might be capable of doing. I think one lesson of the story is that we cannot know or predict how God may intervene in our lives on our behalf.

A second element in the story is Jesus criticizing their fear of the situation, their lack of faith. One can make a good argument that we have nothing to fear, *ever!* If we truly believe God is lovingly present in our lives and that God can transform whatever is evil in our lives into something beautiful, what could we possibly be afraid of? Our fear, like that of the disciples in the boat, simply shows our lack of faith in God’s care.

Finally, and most instructive to me, is the need to become quiet enough to hear the voice saying, “Do not be afraid.” It is counterintuitive that we must silence the chaos in our own minds before we can hear and know the still small voice of God that has all situations well in hand. And yet, that is exactly what the calm face of God in Jesus encourages us to do.

22.

The Face of Submission

Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done. Luke 22:42

The setting for this passage is a garden on the Mount of Olives, moments before Jesus is betrayed

into the hands of the temple police to be tried, tortured, and crucified. Jesus is spending his final free moments on earth in prayer with his Father. He asks if this *cup* – the upcoming suffering and death – can be eliminated and some other, perhaps less gruesome way to accomplish God’s purposes be found. He closes by *submitting*, however, saying, “...not my will but yours be done.”

There are those who claim Jesus could have saved himself from the agony of his final hours by exercising the divine powers he displayed throughout his ministry. Perhaps he could have set a series of plagues in motion, as was done to the Egyptians. Maybe a crumbling of the city walls, as occurred in Jericho. A pillar of cloud could have covered Jesus and allowed him to escape unnoticed. While these options may have been possible, none were realistic. Jesus could not escape the fate awaiting him without denying the essence of who he was. It was the fact that he expressed his divinity in his humanity that threatened others so. No doubt, the religious and political elite would have preferred to have Jesus renounce his divine nature, to deny that he was the Son of God (and thus equal to God), discrediting Jesus for the rest of his days and allowing everyone peaceably to go back to their normal lives.

Being true to who and what we are makes us *vulnerable* and forces us to *submit* to certain realities. When we commit to love another, we make ourselves vulnerable to that person. Jesus’ foundational commandment was for us to love each other. In our relationships, we submit to some things we might otherwise resist because the value of the relationship outweighs the value of our own preferences. The

deeper we love and submit, the more exposed we become; thus, the deeper we can be hurt. Jesus loved unconditionally, he submitted completely, and he suffered tremendously at the hands of those he loved. And yet, from the cross, he sought forgiveness for those who took his life because he realized they did not know what they were doing. They could not help themselves.

It seems counter-intuitive to think of God as submissive, as bending to *our* will, but that is a face manifested in Jesus. When we remain faithful to who we are, we open ourselves to criticism, persecution, and hatred, especially by those who have no such grasp of their own identity. When we know the *why* of

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our existence – our *purpose* for being – we become a threat to those who do not. To be in the presence of one who understands their *who* and *why* is a powerful and humbling experience. It often leaves those who are less secure feeling inferior and frightened. In Jesus' case, they captured him, beat him, publicly shamed him, and killed him in the most excruciating manner known at the time. It was the best option their limited identity at the time could find. In Stephen Vincent Benet's haunting poem, *Carol¹⁰*, one character, observing Jesus on the cross, concludes "We're surer of God when we know he's dead." Jesus understood that reality and submitted to it. He loved, in spite of the high personal cost.

Jesus, in all his acts on earth, manifested God as *love*; and love submits. Always, and in all situations, love submits to a higher good. Does this mean we do not defend what we believe is right, that we do not resist evil and correct injustice? Certainly not! It only means that we refuse to act in ways beyond what love and our identity allow. For example, if we identify with the non-violent face of God, we might physically shield a loved one from danger but not take the offensive against the perpetrator. Love's focus is outward to the beloved, not inward to the personal needs of the lover. Jesus modeled that perfectly on the cross. Love is always *other-focused*, always true to its nature, and always submissive to greater purposes, even to the death of the lover. *Not my will but yours be done.*

23.

The Face of Normal

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only (child), full of grace and truth. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

John 1:14,18

In his book *Convictions*,¹¹ the late theologian Marcus Borg has a chapter titled *Jesus is the Norm*. Borg's thesis is that trying to discern and follow the will of God from scripture and other religious teachings can be confusing. We only need one source

to follow – the life of Jesus. The more we know about how Jesus lived, the more we know about how we can live in harmony with the divine. This stems from the belief that God took on flesh in the person of Jesus and lived among us as a divine example. God, as Spirit, is invisible and mysterious. God in Jesus, however, became visible and tangible. The question, “What would Jesus do?” has often seemed trite to me, and yet it recognizes Jesus as the standard-setter for our behavior. So, what are the implications for our lives if Jesus is the face of normal?

To find answers, we look to the stories of Jesus in the New Testament. Matthew’s chapters 5 and 6 are full of words of wisdom to guide our lives. For example, in 5:42, Jesus says, “Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.” With regard to nonviolent resistance, “Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (5:39). A few passages later (5:44), “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” There are lessons in humility, as in 6:1: “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.” For the hoarders: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal” (6:19). And for the worriers, “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today” (6:34).

Words of wisdom are a start, but applying them is another matter. How did Jesus live these principles? In Matthew 8:16, “That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and cured all who were

sick.” Healing the sick was one of the primary acts of Jesus’ ministry. While we may not be able to cast out spirits with a word, we are all capable of giving our attention, fixing a meal, doing yardwork, or visiting the lonely. Healing does not only occur by removing, but also by relieving the physical or mental symptoms. Another pillar of Jesus’ interactions was to feed the hungry. In Matthew’s version of Jesus feeding five thousand people, Jesus said, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat” (14:16), and he made certain there was food enough for all. Jesus was not afraid to challenge established authority when they used their power in improper ways. For example, when his disciples were criticized by the religious elite for not observing their dietary laws, Jesus rebuked

***We really need only one source for
spiritual guidance – the life of Jesus.***

them, saying, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” (15:3). Jesus also demonstrated the importance of individual and private communion with God. From 26:36, “Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, ‘Sit here while I go over there to pray.’” If alone time with God was important for Jesus, it is important for us, too.

This is a small sampling from the Gospel of Matthew about how Jesus thought and lived. If I knew anyone who practiced half of what Jesus taught, I would consider them *extraordinary*. But if Jesus is to be believed, these are not extraordinary acts – they are the *norm*. Rather than feeling discouraged and

inadequate, however, we should remember that the people in Jesus' time probably did no better than we do. Otherwise, Jesus would not have felt the need to show them a better way. Patterning my life after Jesus' life is a herculean task from where I am today; but by studying his life I can discern a next step, and then another, in order to draw my life closer to the face of normal.

24.

A Human Face

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. John 1:18

In the Old Testament, God is mostly mysterious, unpredictable, and intangible. God appears in dreams, as a pillar of cloud, and as a burning bush that is not consumed. God is all-knowing and all-powerful, but aloof and inaccessible except to a select few. In the Jewish Temple, the Holy of Holies – the innermost shrine where God was believed to reside – could not be entered by anyone except the High Priest, and then only once a year. Although God's grace manifested throughout the Old Testament, particularly in the freeing of the Jewish people from their bonds of slavery in Egypt, God is presented as being mostly unapproachable and capricious, at least for the common folks.

The New Testament presents an entirely different face of God, taking on human flesh in the

person of Jesus of Nazareth. In anticipation of the birth of Jesus, the coming child was referred to as *Emmanuel*, which means “God with us.” Unlike the God often portrayed in the Old Testament, Jesus had a distinct affinity for regular people and particularly for the outcasts, sick, lame, foreigners, widows, and children. He reserved his stiffest criticism for the religious leaders who piously set themselves and their God apart from being accessible to everyone. Jesus called common fishermen and despised tax collectors to be among his chosen disciples. He associated with prostitutes and lepers. He healed, taught, and fed everyone who came to him with a sincere desire to know and experience *God with us*.

According to John’s Gospel, *Jesus came to make God known*. There would be no more struggling to understand the cryptic teachings of the priests and the prophets as *go-betweens*, mediating between God and God’s people. In Jesus, God was present for all to be

The human face of God in Jesus calls to us: “Follow me.”

touched and witnessed, to be healed, and to experience. Instead of saying, “Obey my commandments,” Jesus said, “Follow me.” In other words, “Do as I do.” Loving and caring for others, tending to those on the fringes of society, welcoming the stranger – God, through Jesus, displayed concrete actions that people could observe and emulate. Jesus modeled non-violence in a decidedly violent world. He preached a message of abundance to a world where food, shelter, and other necessities were hoarded by a few to the detriment of many. He

shared a message of love for all to a world sharply divided along lines of race, religion, and nationality. Thankfully, he shared parables that are as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago because most of these divisive realities are still with us today.

John 1:17 says, “The law indeed was given through Moses (Old Testament); grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” Verse 18 names Jesus as God’s Son, “who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” The authors of the Old Testament described a God whose mercy and justice was mediated through a set of rules governing human behavior. In the New Testament, God is revealed as a human being, allowing us to learn how to *be with* God, to *be with* others, and finally to *be with* ourselves. God is love, and it is in that love that we find God. Ultimately, we can only find the essence of our being in God. Becoming that love is what Jesus modeled for us. Jesus was God in a human body – fully human and fully spirit. When we realize that we too are a manifestation of this unity of body and spirit, we gain the ability to truly follow Jesus not just as God’s creation, but as co-creators with God in healing our broken world, even as we heal our own broken lives. The human face of God in Jesus calls to us: “Follow me.”

25.

The Bridegroom

He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease. John 3:29-30

Here is an unexpected face of God: the bridegroom. In its context, the passage above is John the Baptist speaking to his followers who are wondering if they should now follow Jesus. John confesses that his own ministry must now decrease so that of Jesus can increase. John was the warm-up act, but Jesus would now be the star of the show. This was not reason for sadness but for rejoicing. In fact, John says that hearing the voice of Jesus made his own joy complete, and therein lies a lesson for us.

We live in obsessively individualistic times, and the idea of willingly taking a back seat to anyone seems absurd. Many of us act as though the universe revolves around us, which in a sense is true, but only in a *very* limited sense. Anything and anyone that might remove us from our privileged pedestal is a threat. Certainly, one of the biggest and most frequently occurring threats is that of change. Our ego does not like change, except for when it is someone else who changes to accommodate our desires. In order to allow Christ to increase in our lives, however, our ego must be coaxed out of the limelight and corralled into its subservient place.

The biblical analogy of Jesus as the bridegroom positions us – including those of the male gender – as the bride (“He who has the bride is the bridegroom.”). Although this reference is not widely used in the Bible, it is particularly interesting and thought provoking. In Genesis (2:24), speaking of marriage, the author writes: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” Could it be that Jesus left his Father in heaven to come be one life with us? I think that is exactly the implication. A marriage implies a close relationship – so close that the two lives become one. The New Testament references to a wife submitting to her husband (Titus 2:5, for example), so

***With Christ as our bridegroom, we are
invited into what some contemplatives
refer to as a mystical marriage.***

troubling for so many, may stem from the need for us, as the bride, to submit to the Lordship of Christ, the bridegroom.

In this context, masculine and feminine refer to an *orientation* to another and not a gender assignment. Any of us can choose this orientation in a particular situation regardless of our gender. Although some feminine traits may come more naturally to those born as a woman, we all possess unique combinations of masculine and feminine characteristics. In his book Integral Spirituality,¹² Ken Wilber writes, “...the healthy feminine principle tends toward flowing, relationship, care, and compassion...” The inference is that in order to receive the invitation of the

bridegroom, we need to be in a flow with the divine, to be in right relationship with God and others, and to have those relationships characterized by care and compassion.

God in Jesus manifested as a perfect union of physical body and spirit – 100% human and 100% divine. With the Christ as our bridegroom, we are invited into what some contemplatives refer to as a *mystical marriage*. It is mystical in the sense that it is not a typical physical union – we cannot see, hear, smell, taste, or touch this bridegroom. We must develop a broader set of perceptual capabilities – spiritual senses – in order to consummate this union. A mystical union is one where two lives unite, yet retain their individual natures. Jesus' humanity did not diminish his divinity, nor did his divinity diminish his humanity. He retained all of both. A new being is created – reborn, if you will – that is neither, yet both. The face of God as bridegroom invites us into a mystical union where we do not lose the traits that make us who we are, but which strips those traits of the distortions that limit their use for higher purposes. In other words, we become far better and holier versions of who we already are in Christ.

The bridegroom awaits...

26.

The Face of Compassion

When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" John 5:6

To paraphrase Fr. Richard Rohr from a number of his writings, "God is found where the suffering is." Nowhere is that more evident than in the accounts of the life of Jesus found throughout the New Testament. This should surprise no one, since Jesus was a manifestation of God in human form. Although it is not clear whether Jesus sought out suffering people, he clearly did not shy away from them, either. Particularly with those who were shunned by society – those with leprosy and other visible infirmities, for example – Jesus not only acknowledged their existence and worth, he *healed* them.

In the story from the Gospel of John quoted above, Jesus found a lame man lying beside a pool, begging for someone to help him into the pool at the stirring of the water. There was a belief that whoever was first into the pool when the water stirred would be healed. Because of the man's disability, he was never able to get himself into the pool in time. Jesus asked him if he *wanted* to be made well. The man complained that he had no one to help him into the water, thinking that was his only hope. Jesus told the man to get up and walk, and the man got up and walked!

The religious elite chose not to rejoice about a lame man who was made well. Rather, they complained that Jesus had violated the Law by healing on the Sabbath. Jesus responded in verse 17: “My Father is still working, and I also am working.” In my opinion, too many religious people and institutions continue to focus on rules, laws, and their own perpetuation while ignoring the pain and suffering in their presence. God’s compassionate gaze, manifest in Jesus, would not pass suffering by, regardless of the social norms, laws, or day of the week.

We see this same compassion throughout the ministry of Jesus, including with the woman caught in the act of adultery (John 8:1-11), the man with an unclean spirit (Mark 1:21-27), the woman suffering from hemorrhages (Matthew 9:20-22), and the healing

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of the Centurion’s servant (Luke 7:2-10). And here is a lesson for us: God-in-Jesus told us to show compassion, too. For example, in Matthew 25, Jesus told about the judging of the nations and said of those who will inherit the kingdom, “...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” The crowd asked when these

things occurred, and Jesus responded, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” While we may or may not have the ability to completely heal another, any one of us can ease another’s suffering in some way. We serve Jesus when we serve others in need.

Reading the accounts of Jesus and how he cared for suffering people makes me wonder what he would do if he walked the streets of my hometown today. How would he react to the panhandlers, to the mentally ill, or to the homeless? I walk by them too often, pretending I do not see or hear. I do not believe Jesus would do the same. How does the compassionate face of God call us to respond to the suffering in our world? That question is one I believe we all wrestle with throughout our lives. We should not be too hard on ourselves as we reconcile our hearts and our actions, however. God’s is a face of compassion and encouragement, not one of condemnation.

27.

A Middle-Eastern Hue

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28

Being born white in the central part of the United States, it is no surprise I was raised with a *white*

Jesus. I was raised with a Caucasian, male God, too. The images came from artist's renderings, along with an unspoken assumption that we white folks were God's chosen people, just as the Israelites believed themselves to be God's chosen people of old. The whiteness of God was not anything I challenged; it just was what it was. My upbringing was not anything consciously intended to hurt those of other ethnicities. It was simply a product of being raised white in a very white culture. It also laid the foundation for my racism.

While I understand, intellectually, the conscious and subconscious pain a white God causes those of other races, I cannot pretend to know how deep that pain goes. Millions of African-Americans were forced from their homes and away from everything and everyone familiar to be sold into slavery in America. The indigenous, nomadic peoples of my homeland were forced off the lands that had supported them for countless generations onto pitifully inadequate and constricting reservations where they could no longer carry on life as they knew it. My western-European ancestors claimed this land as their own. For them, America was the new Promised Land, and no sacrifice was too great to make it so, even when that sacrifice denied and destroyed the personhood of others.

It is not my intent to tear down us white folks, but we cannot appreciate the deep-seated suffering that continues to divide us along racial and cultural lines without acknowledging our history of and our participation in, if only indirectly, the gross injustices of the past. Like any deeply repressed memory, it oozes to the surface at inconvenient times, manifesting as poorly understood hatred and violence.

Because there is no safe place to hide, the problem belongs to us all. One starting point for healing, in my opinion, is for people like me to acknowledge that God is not white, and Caucasian is not God's chosen race (any more than any other race).

It is not that my ancestors were bad people. They were mostly good people acting on mistaken beliefs. They used whatever means seemed necessary to attain their end of developing a self-proclaimed, God-given Promised Land for their purposes. Unfortunately and too often, the means were violent and oppressive. The end, however, is justified by whatever means are required when we believe we are carrying out the work of God. The weight of that generations-old

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oppression still sits heavily on the backs of too many of our brothers and sisters, mostly beneath even their conscious awareness. Those of us who are descendants of the oppressors still bear the guilt, if subconsciously, and the healing must begin with us. While I do not know what forms of healing will be required to transform this pervasive wounding, I believe the first step is acknowledgement of my indirect culpability and the benefits that have accrued directly to me because of the unjust actions of my ancestors. "White privilege" is real, and I must own it.

Jesus, God in human form, was born into what we call the Middle East. His skin color certainly reflected that of his neighbors (i.e., *not* white). He

would have appeared with neither the dark skin typical of the African peoples to the south, nor the light skin common to the Scandinavian races to the north. Rather, Jesus would have been a blend of those colors. In addition, the Middle East was a blending of cultures. The Western cultures came to practice mostly Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. The Eastern peoples tended more towards Hinduism and Buddhism. Jesus lived at the crossroads of humankind, inclusive of and accessible to all. Honestly, where else would we expect God to appear? He blended cultures and hues because his Father, our God, creates and loves them all. Thus, there is a Middle-Eastern hue to the face of God. As Paul tells the Galatians, we are united as one in Christ. Our challenge is finding out how to honor the many and varied hues of God with the love and respect accorded them as fellow and equal children of our one God. That is where the healing will begin.

Part 3

The Trinity

28.

The Three Visitors

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. Genesis 18:1-2

Abraham, the father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is relaxing outside of his tent on a hot afternoon when the Lord appears to him as three men. Remember, the names given to God in Genesis are plural nouns. The name translated as *Lord* is *Adonai*, which is not only plural, but also has feminine connotations. Regardless, the Lord appears to Abraham as three men in this story. Abraham offers the visitors a place to rest, water to drink, and food to eat, which they accept.

As they converse, one of the visitors says, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son” (Genesis 18:10). Abraham and Sarah were already advanced in years and had no children. Sarah laughed at the thought, and one visitor responded, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” (v. 14). The visitors – one God manifest in three persons – talk among themselves and include Abraham in their conversation. The three discuss the rampant evil in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and their plans to destroy both cities. Abraham asked why the Lord would slay the righteous with the wicked. The Lord, as these three persons, agreed to

preserve the cities if even ten righteous people could be found there.

My primary reason for considering the story of the three visitors, however, is because it is the first biblical evidence of God manifesting as three unique persons – what will later be referred to by theologians as the *Trinity*. So many encounters with God in the Bible seem to imply meetings with a single being, notwithstanding the plurality of the names used.

Although Abraham addresses the three visitors as “Lord,” there is no explanation as to how he knew their divine nature, except perhaps from the content of their conversation. Their discussion with Abraham

God is not a distant ruler sitting on a throne high above us, but a God that is here with us, wrestling with how best to handle the issues of the day.

about the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah was clearly a two-way conversation, meaning that Abraham seemed to be included as an equal participant. When he questions whether everyone in the towns needs to be destroyed, they go into something of a negotiation over who, if anyone, is righteous enough to warrant saving.

Here is what I find so interesting about this story. The God presented in Genesis 18 is a *relational* and *personable* God, consulting and communing with humans. The three visitors *invite* Abraham into their discussion and consider his point of view in shaping their decision-making. Not only is God presented as a

relationship of persons, but there is also give and take both within and without this God-circle. This God is not a distant and dictatorial ruler sitting on a throne high above us, but a God that is here with us, wrestling with how best to handle the issues of the day. The story also refutes any fatalistic notions of God, that God has the future mapped out in advance and nothing we can do will change it. The God of Genesis includes us as co-creators of and co-participants in our daily reality, just as God included Abraham in the determination of what to do about Sodom and Gomorrah.

The Trinity – one God in three persons – is a difficult concept to grasp. The story of the three visitors, however, refutes the traditional image we hold of God as being distant and aloof. Instead, God invites us into the divine relationship that is God and that is the foundation of our being. We cannot hope consciously to experience more of God's presence in our lives without first eliminating our restrictive misconceptions of God.

One of the faces of God is that of three visitors.

29.

Three Faces, One God

Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.
Deuteronomy 6:4 (NIV)

The *Trinity* – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit – is a foundational pillar of

Christianity, in spite of the fact that the term does not appear in the Bible. Furthermore, if we removed all references to the Trinity from Christian thought, the practice of most Christians would not change at all. This is a testament to how difficult the concept is to grasp in a tangible way. It is humbling to attempt writing about a mystery that so defies expression in words. Yet, no book on *The Faces of God* would be complete without at least a cursory nod to the Trinity. Indeed, the faces of God expressed throughout the Bible and throughout human experience *are* manifestations of the persons of the Trinity.

One reason the Trinity is so difficult to understand is our misunderstanding of the nature and being of God. Many of us grew up with the image of God as an old, angry, white male with long, white hair and an unkempt beard. That is a very limiting image, and to the extent that is our picture and

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understanding of God, to that same extent do we miss the immensity, the love, the relational nature, and the personal intimacy of God. The concept of the Trinity begins to crack that old image by presenting God as three *persons*. One God, but one God manifesting in different ways. A less than perfect example that helps me is to recognize that I am one person serving many distinct roles. I act as a husband,

father, brother, son, uncle, nephew, friend, co-worker – sometimes all in the span of a few hours. I relate and appear differently to others in my different roles, but I am one being. If someone only knows me as an employer, he or she may not experience the love and tenderness I express in other roles. When we limit our understanding of God to a single expression, we miss the infinite diversity and endless possibilities of the one we call God. We all wear many faces, so why would the God who formed us be any different? Three persons, three faces, three roles – one God.

In the following chapters, I will express my limited understanding of the three persons of the Trinity as individuals, but understand up front – they are *all* 100% God, and they are one God. The three faces of God are no more separate from each other than my various roles are from my essence – they are simply different expressions of it. What differs in the persons of God is how *we* experience God. In his devotional, *A Spring Within Us*,⁶ Father Richard Rohr summarizes the Trinity in this way (p. 258): “God for us, we call you Father. God alongside us, we call you Jesus. God within us, we call you Holy Spirit.”

Besides the multiplicity of the expressions of God, there is a sense of God as constant *motion* or *flow* among and between the expressions, ever moving, ever changing, and always inviting us to join into this dance or rhythm of life. As we enter that flow, we experience life as good and natural; our *yoke* becomes easy. To the extent we try to hold onto our lives as they are, resisting growth and change, to that same extent do we separate ourselves from the security of this loving flow, the ever-evolving beauty, and our participation in the intimate relationship awaiting us

from inside this mysterious, Trinitarian God. When our image of God restructures as a relational interaction of three or more persons, we recognize our personal invitation to participate in mutual giving and receiving, in shared evolutionary movement. We experience *together* the joys and pains, the beauty and barrenness, the on-going birth, growth, death, and resurrection of all that is and ever will be. We are co-creators and co-experiencers *with* God. Until we begin to understand God's true nature, God's *relational* nature, we will mistakenly experience God as separate, aloof, limited, and unpredictable.

Our lives manifest in ways similar to the changing seasons. Winter contains within it spring, summer, and fall, and we contain all that we are from before the moment of our first breath. Life is an awakening to possibilities that have existed since the dawn of creation, a divine dance with the God in whom we live and move and have our being. The Trinity invites us into a dynamic relationship as co-participants in this eternal celebration of life.

30.

God the Father, Part 1

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. Genesis 1:1-4

One person of the Trinity, the one probably most often associated with God, is God the Father. This is the eternal creator, the mysterious one working behind the scenes, constantly making all things new in ways inconceivable to us. This is perhaps the face of God most often portrayed in the Old Testament, appearing, for example, as a pillar of cloud leading the Israelites out of Egypt. The people believed if they looked upon this God they would die. When Moses asked this manifestation of God for a name, God the Father said, "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14).

Mysterious. Unknown. Unknowable. When these terms are used to describe God, they usually refer to God the Father, although the terms can be applied appropriately to any manifestation of God. From a human perspective, unpredictable, moody, and frightening are also apt descriptors. God the Father, in actuality, only appears this way to us because this manifestation of God is the one we are least capable of relating to in a personal way. Psalm 139:6 says, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high I cannot attain it." This is the face of God that places and holds heavenly bodies in their orbits, that sets atomic particles in motion, and sustains every part of creation in between. This aspect of God is simply incomprehensible to us, completely beyond anything we can imagine, not to mention being indescribable with words. Yet, we try.

In C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*¹³, the God-figure is a full-grown lion named Aslan. Aslan is described as always good, but never safe. The message is that, from our perspective, there is a wild, untamed aspect to God that will threaten everything

we hold tightly to for safety, security, and stability. Of course, the reason God seems so threatening is our misunderstanding that there is safety, security, or stability outside of the love of and trust in God. We dare to believe God the Father is always for us, but we also recognize that this life can cause immense suffering until we fully trust that God always makes *all* things work together for good, even though the process is sometimes painful.

In the opening verses of the Bible, God *sweeps* over the waters and *speaks* creation into being. “*Then God said let there be...*” God then *breathes* life into

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creation. It is instructive to look at speaking and breath and to remember that the Hebrew word used for *breath* is the same word used for *spirit*. When we speak, we use our breath to set our vocal chords in motion, vibrating in specific ways that create specific sounds. Those vibrations create sound waves of particular frequencies. Waves of sound at specific frequencies will rearrange matter. On a large scale, this is what happens in an earthquake or a tsunami, which are vibrational waves with the power to recreate, albeit in destructive ways. Think of lithotripsy, where inaudible sound waves break up kidney stones inside the body. A violinist playing

notes over a table will rearrange grains of sand into patterns consistent with the wave frequencies emanating from the violin. Sound waves manifest in infinite variety and intensity, well beyond our limited ability to hear them, so we only perceive a tiny portion of the infinite range of vibrational possibilities. This, then, is the image of the biblical account of creation; that God *spoke*, or that creational vibrations emanated from (and continue to emanate from) God to shape and reshape earthly elements into all created things. God's spirit then hovered over these shapes and breathed life into them. This is not a scientific explanation of creation, nor is it intended to be. Whether we believe in a seven day creation or a big bang is irrelevant. The miracle of God speaking, shaping, and breathing life into being is beyond comprehension, both to scientists and theologians.

God the Father's fingerprint marks everything that is; God is present in all things, and God is forever creating and recreating. Nothing is safe because God's creation is in constant motion and a constant state of change. Everything is safe, however, because in its changing everything is drawn closer to its true image and likeness in God.

31.

God the Father, Part 2

Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Isaiah 64:8

There is a profound but subtle point in referring to God as Father. It is that for there to be a father, there must also be children. In other words, for the reference to hold there must be a parent-child *relationship*. This, then, is one of the characteristics often overlooked about God – that we are in close relationship to God. It is our choice to acknowledge and pursue that relationship or not, but either way, we are related.

My daughter, Grace, was born seven weeks before her due date. She was very small, even by infant standards. I could literally hold Grace comfortably in one hand, with her bottom at the base of my palm and the tops of my fingers securing her head. It was a reverential experience to hold this tiny, beautiful, perfect human being in my hand. I was an enormous being by comparison – stronger and infinitely more powerful. She, in her weakness, however, held complete power over my heart. Much as I vowed to protect both of my children from harm, they got sick, scrapped their knees, and had their hearts broken. For my part, I suffered alongside them, albeit not physically. In one of his Living School¹⁴ lectures, James Finley said, “God is the presence that spares us from nothing, even while it sustains us in everything.” This is the promise from our divine parent – not that bad things will never happen to us, but that we will never be alone in our suffering.

To refer to God as Father causes many of our brothers and sisters to turn away because their earthly experience with one or both parents was so painful. A parent-child relationship is *not* a relationship of equals. At least in a child’s early years, their father is probably the biggest, strongest being they know. That strength

can be used to protect and provide security for the child, or that strength can be used to inflict unspeakable suffering. Too many parents are so wounded and broken themselves that they cannot allow their child to have any emotional power over them – they cannot get in touch with their natural protective, nurturing instincts. Often, their own abusive parents victimized them. Some parents use their power over children to strike back at the world that struck them in their most vulnerable state. It is a

This is the promise from our divine parent – not that bad things will never happen to us, but that we will never be alone in our suffering.

heartbreaking and difficult cycle to break. The worst of the abusers end up in jail, but the abused children are still left to abuse their children one day unless and until they are healed in a way that transforms their pain.

It is the inequality of the relationship and the vast power discrepancy that makes a parental figure especially intimidating. It is difficult to feel safe if there is any hint they may use their power to harm us. Many times in the Bible we are exhorted to *fear* God. I think one purpose of this is to recognize the immensity of God in relation to us. The parent always has the upper hand, and we are always vulnerable in their presence. Trust is required if there is to be any sense of mutual giving and receiving.

The reference to God as Father cannot be dismissed as irrelevant just because many of us earthly

fathers fall short in caring for our children. That we are in a relationship with God, one where the awesomeness of God looks upon us as an enamored parent lovingly gazes upon their precious child, is an image we are clearly to discern from scripture. The good parent uses their greater power to protect, nurture, teach, and empower the child. They are loving, patient, and kind. They defend their children against as many threats as possible. This is supposed to be the *norm*, not the exception. The parental model is God the Father/Mother, not because God keeps bad things from happening to good people, but because God the Parent never abandons and never stops loving his/her children. A child may not understand *why* their parent loves them, but they know *when* they are loved. A child cannot *earn* parental love, but they can *respond* to that love in loving ways. A loved child becomes a loving parent, and this is one intended outcome of any parent-child relationship, including our relationship with God the Father.

32.

God the Son, Part 1

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. John 1:1-4

Any attempt to capture in words that which cannot reasonably be explained, let alone understood intellectually, will ultimately seem futile to both the reader and the writer. Such is the case with the mysterious and primal reality of the Trinity. We can only talk *around* this foundation of our faith. Further, I address the three persons of the Trinity separately in order to point out distinctions in the ways they manifest to us. In reality, the three persons – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – are a single Unity that we call God. They are inseparable, interdependent, and constantly in dynamic communion with one another and with us.

God the Son is the Incarnate (embodied or manifest) Word of God, as opposed to God the Father, who does not have a physical body. God the Father enters into and shapes the material reality of the earth to create life as we know it – humans, plants, animals, hills, rocks, trees. Creation, in its many forms, is the Son, or child of God. As with our discussion of God the Father, God the Son necessarily implies a *relationship*. In other words, for there to be a Son (or daughter), there must also be a parent. What I am attempting to describe is a relationship more than a specific being, and our lives are an integral part of that relationship.

To use sexual imagery, God the Father – the divine masculine energy – penetrates the formless void of the fertile, maternal Earth (see Genesis 1:2), and creation results. The Father is the creative force, the Mother is the receptive Earth, and the Son is the resulting creation – God’s offspring, God’s prodigy. The ultimate example of the impregnation of earth by spirit manifested in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

He is the perfect combination of body and spirit, being 100% God and 100% human. Jesus' seamless integration of divine and human natures makes him our Savior, our Messiah, the Anointed One. It is the lived experience that we are *both* body and spirit that "saves" us because, as Jesus so graphically displayed on the cross, only the body part of us suffers and dies. That which rises from the earth falls back to the earth. The rest, however, lives on.

The Genesis account of creation provides the image of God *speaking* creation into being. In John's account of creation, the *Word* is created reality. That Word, in its ever-changing forms, has been one face of God since the beginning. John says, "All things

***The Father is the creative force, the
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Son is the resulting creation.***

came into being *through* him." In addition, John writes, "What has come into being *in* him was life." The words *in* and *through* are keys to understanding the Word, or the Son, or the creation of God. We come into being *through* the Son and live *in* that incarnate aspect of God. This is why we often close our prayers by saying, "*In* Jesus' name" or "*Through* Jesus Christ our Lord." We live, physically, in the manifested reality of the Son of God, even as we are influenced by the non-manifest energies of the Father and the Spirit. We cannot know this intellectually, we can only recognize our participation in this Oneness experientially.

In a dynamic, on-going process, the creative impulse of the Father penetrates the fertile womb of the Earth and creation results: light separates from darkness; the waters above part from the waters below; dry land divides from the waters; vegetation appears; seasons, stars, sun and moon rule the day and night; birds fill the skies and fish fill the seas; animals of every kind spring up from the earth; and humankind appears. The Creator creates in an on-going, evolutionary way, and the created gazes back in awe. This, then, is one way to picture the unfathomable relationship between us, God the Father, and God the Son. Creation – the Child – is the dynamic, physical manifestation of the Spirit of God in everything created. The Christ is the Spirit clothed in flesh, completely aware of its Oneness (body *and* spirit), embodied in the stuff of the earth, and perfectly displayed in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Son of Man, and the Son of God.

33.

God the Son, Part 2

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." Luke 1:26-28

A *virgin* is one who is pure. Mary, the mother of Jesus, modeled untainted, non-desecrated earth – a

willing and surrendered human canvas upon which God could create. One can picture her in a way similar to the “formless void” of the earth described in Genesis 1:2. Just as the spirit of God overshadowed the amorphous earth to give birth to creation, so the spirit overshadowed Mary, and she gave birth to Jesus, Son of God. The tangible birth of Jesus substantiates the ethereal creation account in Genesis. It helps to make creation and God’s work in our world personal and relatable.

We often confuse the Son of God and the Christ. Christ is a designation for one who has attained an exceptional awareness of their relationship to God, as

As long as our spirits are embodied physically, we are living in the Son of God. Our relationship with God is through the Son.

in Jesus *the* Christ. It means *anointed*, or to make sacred, or to dedicate to the service of God. In Eastern philosophy, *Christ Consciousness* is attained when one perfectly unites their essential physical *and* spiritual natures. Recognizing we, too, are children of God – products of spirit *and* earth – it is getting in touch with the spirit within that *saves* us. Such knowledge rescues us from the fear that we can ever be separated from God. Here is how we become *lost*: We grow enamored with our material existence early in life and lose sight of our spiritual, eternal nature. When our lives are out of balance on the physical side, as most lives are, we identify with earthly, non-permanent *stuff*. Do not get me wrong, there is true

beauty and pleasure in the things of the earth. They are impermanent, however, and so cannot provide the security we seek. Referring to our physical natures, Genesis 3:19 says, "...for out of (the ground) you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return." The spiritual side of us, however, never dies. That part of us comes from God and takes on an earthly body for a time. When our body gives out, our spiritual essence lives on.

As long as our spirits are embodied physically, we are living *in* the Son of God – God's creation. Our access to and relationship with God is *through* the Son. Unfortunately, we continue stubbornly to focus on our temporal, physical natures. We think we are our jobs or homes, but jobs and homes are lost every day. We think we are our possessions, which wear out, break, or are stolen. We think we are our thoughts, which distractedly flitter and flutter in every direction. We think we are our bodies, which wither and die. Is it any wonder we become such insecure, frightened beings?

The *Christ* is creation when its spiritual essence has opened into conscious awareness. Jesus of Nazareth displayed that realization, whether by birth or by growing into it, becoming the perfect combination of earth and spirit we are to aspire to. Because we live in the Son of God, we are known and loved completely, just as we are. When Jesus looked upon the suffering people in his midst, he encouraged them not to identify with their pain or their problems. Rather, he encouraged them to look at themselves through him, to have faith, to believe in his reality, knowing his was their reality, too. It is as if he were saying, "*I know you*, and you are so much more than

your suffering. Your pain will end, but your life in me will never end.” It is in the Son of God that we live and move and have our being. God in us, Emmanuel, is our true identity and our eternal nature, and that cannot be taken from us. As we increase our ability to manifest our divine nature, we become instruments for God to work through on earth.

In some ways, our task is to become like Mary, ready and willing to surrender completely to the urgings of the Spirit. And one day, by the unfathomable grace of God, the Spirit may overshadow us and manifest the Son of God, the child of the Most High, the Christ within *us* – Emmanuel.

34.

God the Spirit, Part 1

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. John 14:25-26

The three persons of the Trinity of God are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. One can describe God the Father as the unembodied creative force, the impetus behind everything created. God the Son, the creation, is the resulting life formed by the outpouring – the Word – of the Father onto the substance of the earth. The progeny of the unbroken relationship between Father and Son – Creator and Created – is

the Holy Spirit. For this reason, it is nearly impossible to have an insightful discussion about the Spirit, or God for that matter, except in the context of relationship.

Perhaps more than anything, the relational nature of the Trinity trips us up as we try to understand something discerning about the nature of God. Here are a few writings of others that help me imagine God as dynamically relational, as opposed to the static, distant being I learned in childhood. First, Meister Eckhart¹⁵, a 13th Century mystic, wrote:

...the Father laughs and gives birth to the Son.

The Son laughs back at the Father and gives birth to the Spirit.

The whole Trinity laughs and gives birth to us.

Here we see the Spirit described as the product of a joyful relationship between the Father and the Son. Further, we live inside this dynamic, loving relationship between the Father, Son, and Spirit. Although most of us are unaware of it, we all – individually and corporately – exist in the Trinity of God. A second image is in Richard Rohr’s book, *The Divine Dance*¹⁶, where he writes, “the principle of one is lonely; the principle of two is oppositional...; the principle of three is inherently moving, dynamic, and generative.” Later, in the same book¹⁷, Rohr writes “...you can know and love God on at least three distinctly wonderful levels: the Transpersonal level (“Father”), the Personal level (“Jesus”), and the Impersonal level (“Holy Spirit”). Finally¹⁸, Rohr paraphrases Richard of St. Victor, writing, “For God to be good, God can be one. For God to be loving, God has to be two. Because love is always a relationship...But for God to ‘share excellent joy’ and

‘delight’...God has to be three, because supreme happiness is when two persons share their common delight in a third something – together.”

The initial manifestation of the Spirit grows out of the mutual love between the Father and Son, within the totality of God. The Spirit within us is a product of our relationship to and in God, as well as a manifestation of our relationships with others. In John 14, Jesus tells his disciples the Father will send the Spirit after his departure. This means that while

The reason the Spirit is so difficult to perceive is that it is the unembodied product of a relationship.

God was present in the bodily form of Jesus *with* the people of his time, God would continue to be eternally present *within* everyone in the person of the Spirit.

The reason the Spirit is so difficult to perceive, aside from the fact that it has no physical nature, is that it is the unembodied product of a relationship. We tend to underestimate or ignore this *third something* that appears in all our encounters with others. As we open ourselves to a closer relationship to God, we sense a presence that never leaves us, that gives substance to our faith, and that gives hope when there is no tangible reason for optimism. That presence is the Holy Spirit, our divine teacher, spiritual companion, and Advocate.

The Spirit of God is also referred to as the Wisdom of God. In Proverbs, wisdom is described as something of immeasurable value that we should

desire more than anything else. “For whoever finds me (wisdom) finds life and obtains favor from the Lord” (8:35). Our Trinitarian God imparts its wisdom through the Spirit dwelling within us. Of course, we must build a relationship with and an awareness and acknowledgement of that Spirit in order consciously to benefit from its presence.

35.

God the Spirit, Part 2

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Matthew 18:20

The third person of the Trinity is the Holy Spirit, which is a product of *relationship*. Relationship occurs when someone is in fellowship with one or more others. Reflecting on my marriage, there is a third *something* present that has grown out of our relationship, our love and care for each other, and the life experiences we have endured and enjoyed together for over 30 years. That spirit is unique to the two of us, it changes with us and our circumstances, and it is a manifestation of God the Spirit. A description of marriage found in Genesis 2:24 says the two “become one flesh.” That does not mean that either individual ceases to exist, nor is it exclusively a sexual reference. Quite the contrary, it can be read as referring to a third being – a *spirit* of the relationship that manifests from the connection between the two. Whenever you and I interact there is an *us* produced,

and the essence of that us is the Spirit. We do not perceive this Spirit because we focus on the two people as separate individuals. As we become aware of the Spirit around and within us, we realize there is no such thing as separate individuals because we are all connected. As the apostle Paul writes in many of his letters, together, we are all one Body.

In our bodies, we have largely anonymous groupings of cells called *connective tissue*. It is everywhere in the body and connects skin, organs, muscles, and bones with each other. It functions to hold things in place as well as to exchange nutrients, water, oxygen, and wastes between the various activity centers in the body. We do not often speak of the connective tissue because most of our attention goes

***The Spirit is a product of interaction
and proximity.***

to the major organs. Just as our connective tissue fills the spaces between our bodily parts, so the Spirit fills the spaces between what we perceive as individual beings. In other words, we all are connected in and by the Spirit, even though we cannot see or touch it. We can *feel* it, however. The feeling of the Spirit may be comfortable among friends, familiar among family, and frightening with those who are threatening.

The Spirit is a product of interaction and proximity, and it is not limited to interfaces between people. The Spirit manifests in solitary walks in nature, while gazing at the night sky, or witnessing a stunning sunset. These, too, are interactions within God's creation. Likewise, it develops between people and their beloved pets – the joy of being greeted

enthusiastically by a wagging tail or the comfort of a purring cat asleep on one's lap. We see it manifest in intimate relationships, but also among co-workers, students and teachers, parents and children, and everywhere there is conscious interaction. The Spirit is unique to each relationship, although the experience is not always pleasant. Some people walk into a room and seemingly suck every ounce of joy out of it. Their own pain and need is so great that their contribution to the collective spirit is negative. Fortunately, other folks enter a room and immediately brighten the atmosphere.

One way to picture the Spirit in our everyday life is to describe an electrical circuit. For electricity to power something requires a connection between two points, one giving and the other receiving. When the circuit is complete, electricity flows between one end of the circuit and the other and accomplishes a third something – powering our lives. When the connection is broken, our world goes dark. When two or more interact in giving and receiving ways, the Spirit will manifest – a circuit is completed, and power is generated. Jesus said: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Love is the substance of the Holy Spirit, and we are connected by that love. The Spirit arises out of God, and the Spirit is God. It is incomprehensibly larger than we are, and yet we are intimately and inseparably woven within it. This love, this Spirit, is more real than anything we can touch, smell, see or hear. The Spirit of love surrounds us always, and in that love we live and move and have our being – forever and ever. Amen.

Epilogue: My Face

*Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image,
according to our likeness..."* Genesis 1:26a

According to the creation story recorded in the first chapter of Genesis, humankind was created in the *image* of God and according to God's *likeness*. Not only that, the account is recorded as a conversation within the Godhead: "Let *us* make..." We assume this is a discussion among the persons of the Trinity, which is one of many biblical hints that God, while One God, is not a single being, at least not as we understand single beings. Rather, God's core essence is *relational*. The Trinitarian paradigm describes a God that expresses in different, but interrelated ways. Indeed, I have herein attempted to describe a number of the ways our one God manifests in our lives. The descriptors of those manifestations are familiar to us because many describe very human traits – lonely, sorry, demanding, militant, merciful, vengeful, intimate, calm, submissive, creative, and loving. If we are indeed created in the image and likeness of God, why would we expect anything different?

While I believe it is accurate to claim that we reflect aspects of God's nature, I am not making a case for *pantheism*, which is the belief that everything *is* God. Rather, the more correct term for our relationship to God is *panentheism*, which is the belief that God is *in* everything. The difference is far from

trivial. A pantheist would say “I *am* God (and so are you),” where the panentheist would say “God is *in* me (and also in you).” That I do not perfectly reflect the totality of God’s nature is an understatement and a relief. There is, however, a portion of God’s nature reflected in me. Richard Rohr, in his book *A Spring Within Us*¹⁹, writes, “We cannot bear the impossible burden of being God, but we can and should enjoy the privilege and dignity of being with and in God.”

The first faces of God for most of us are those of our parents (an illusion quickly overcome in adolescence). Imagine an infant gazing up at the loving faces gazing back at him or her. The parents are so much larger, so much more powerful, so much smarter and worldly, and the infant is completely

***God looks out through my eyes and sees
God looking out through your eyes.***

dependent upon them. It must be difficult for an infant to imagine how these incomprehensibly vast beings could be so captivated by one so small, unworthy, and helpless. When parenting works as designed, however, a powerful bond forms between parent and child. For the rest of our lives, even once our parents are gone, we long for that intimate, accepting, and caring connection, particularly during our toughest trials.

When we are in the presence of one we care deeply about, when we feel loved and accepted for who we are and as we are, we enter a state of heightened awareness of who and whose we are. In these experiences, God within us connects with God within the other. Sometimes, the connection is so

powerful that we feel more like witnesses than participants. In those moments, heaven and earth merge, and we know the ground we are standing on is holy. Those moments cannot be forced by strength of will; they are gifts of grace that can only be received when and as given.

When we live with the knowledge that God lives in and through us we begin to understand that our bodies truly are temples of the Most High. God looks out through my eyes and sees God looking out through your eyes, and together we say, “Let us create in our own image,” and life springs forth *from the relationship*. When I identify with God living through me, my prejudices, my biases, and my judgmental vision fall away, and I see the world around me with a clarity not otherwise possible. And I know everything is just as it should be, right here and right now. Obviously, there is work to be done to help the world become as it will be; but for this moment, I can simply enjoy what is in a worshipful, contented way. The moment is always enough when we center ourselves on the presence of God in us.

One of the many faces of God is my face. Another is yours. Divinity lives within us as Emmanuel.

ENDNOTES

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