

## DO YOU FEAR GOD AT HIS COMPUTER?

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In our readings from Kings and Luke we find two widows, two sons, two deaths, two resuscitations, two types of fear and two images of God.

In our Kings passage Elijah cries out to God, "Why have you brought this calamity even upon the widow." Elijah believes that God has caused this disaster and he is afraid that it is his fault. Now the answer he gets is that God did this to allow him to resuscitate the child and prove to the widow (and to us) that he truly is a prophet.

Jesus brings the widow's son back to life and the crowd reacts according to Luke with fear. "Fear seized upon them" is the translation in the NRSV, but the other translations are much different. NIV says, "They were all filled with awe and reverence."

The Message says: They all realized they were in a place of holy mystery, that God was at work among them. They were quietly worshipful—and then noisily grateful, calling out among themselves, "God is back, looking to the needs of his people!"

Fear is the most misunderstood word used in the Bible by people in our society today. The Message is probably the best translation of this passage when it comes to fear of God that has to do with mystery and awe.

Fear in the bible is not necessarily the same as being afraid. I cannot say this often enough, because sadly way too many people are afraid of God. Why?

The answer to this is critical to the future of the church today. Let me preface this by saying that any image of God is a legitimate image of God. Our image of God is personal and collectively as people of God has changed throughout all of time. However tell me your image of God and I will tell you something about your theology. This is why every Spiritual Director I have ever spoken with has asked me for my image of God.

Look at the collect for this week. What does the first line say about God. He is the source of all good things. So what happens if we believe that he is the source of not so good things. What if your image of God resembles a Gary Larson Far Side cartoon?

The cartoon shows God sitting at his computer with a man walking down the street and there is a piano being lifted up to the top of a building by a rope on the screen. God is seated with his finger poised over the keyboard. It looks like he is getting ready to press the button marked "smite".

In our Hebrew scripture Elijah asks God why he has killed the widow's son. Now think for a moment about the image of God that is in this story. This is the finger shaking God, the Santa Claus god the Marcus Borg speaks of in his book. We laugh at that image of God in the cartoon, but how many people actually believe in an image of God that this represents. Maybe the laughter at this cartoon is more nervous laughter than anything else. Many have a problem with an image of God who would allow a child to die just so a prophet could prove that he is a prophet!

Meditating on fear of God sent me back to a book that was critical to my journey in my relationship with God. Marcus Borg wrote *The God We Never Knew* and subtitled the book, Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a more Authentic Contemporary Faith. It was in this book that I first became aware of the difference between a transcendent image of God and an immanent image of God.

A transcendent image of God is what the Gary Larson cartoon represents. This is God up in heaven looking down at the world that he has created and maybe intervening once in awhile. This has been the predominant image of God for thousands of years in Judaism, Christianity and Islam as I understand it. This was certainly the image of the founding fathers of our country who were for the most part Deists. This is the clockmaker god of the time. He created the world stepped back and watched it work. Now many believed that periodically he, and this image is always male, would intervene. This is a view of God shaped by hierarchy and monarchy. God as monarch and of course the monarch was almost always male. We see this in our Nicene Creed, where Jesus is up in heaven seated at the right hand of the father. You cannot get any more transcendent than that.

Now this image works as an all powerful God who is there to save us. Last week we sang the Navy Hymn, Eternal Father strong to save. I heard it again on Friday as the brass quintet played it while the chaplain prayed at the change of command ceremony for Chuck Marks. Our theology is filled with this image.

Yet when disaster strikes "Why God," is the cry. The widow cries out why God? Elijah cries out why God? We wonder why did God decide to push the smite button on his computer. This is the point where many today turn their backs on God and the church and never return. The transcendent image is not enough. This was the image of God of my childhood and I now know the primary reason I wandered away from the church in my 20s. I could not believe in this God. Marcus Borg states that the vast majority of atheists he speaks to lost their faith because this image of God no longer worked for them and it was the only image they had. In our world today this is an image that holds no attraction for our younger population.

There is hope though. For there is a different image of God that is in both the Hebrew scriptures and our New Testament. That brings me to Marcus Borg's immanent God. This is Immanuel, God with us. This is God as portrayed in Psalm 139. This is an immanent loving God who is present no matter where we go or what we do. God is with us even in the pain.

Last week Wendy spoke of living without God was like a fish out of water. Take that a step further. If God is the water then not only are we surrounded by God, but we are filled with God. The human body is mostly water, something like 60% was a figure I looked up. The fish must take the water into themselves in order to live while all the time being surrounded by the water.

Another parallel is air. We are surrounded by air, but we are also filled with air. Oxygen and CO2 float through our bloodstreams. We breath in oxygen and breath out carbon dioxide. When I meditate I focus on breathing, thinking consciously about taking the Spirit into my body, allowing God to fill me.

What is critical in this image is that God is not just transcendent, out there, or immanent inside, but is both and. God is other, but God is with us. In Jesus we had the ultimate God is with us experience. Pentecost is all about how Jesus, God and the Spirit continue to be with us and in us.

Today we celebrate several times of transition. Weddings are times of transition. Graduations are times of transitions. Severe illnesses are times of transition. Funerals are times of transition. At times of transition this image of God is important.

Many of us and our entire church stand in a time of transition and we need the leading of this image of God. We need an image of God that is within us and outside of us.

It is to this image of God that we can say this prayer written by Ted Loder<sup>1</sup> in his book *Guerillas of Grace*:

Lord,  
I believe my life is touched by you, that you want something for me, and of me.  
Give me ears to hear you,  
Eyes to see the tracing of your finger,  
And a heart quickened by the motions of your Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Loder, Ted; *Guerrillas of Grace* (Augsberg Press, Minneapolis MN 1984) pg. 35