

“How Great Is God?”
Psalm 113; Exodus 40:32-38;
Romans 11:30-36; Matthew 17:1-9

February 16, 2014
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

At the beginning of the Psalm, we hear the words, “Who is a God like you?” So we begin to think about who is a god like our God? As we wonder about who God is, we might have different kinds of conceptions or ways of thinking about God. It’s shown up in a few movies. We can think about God being a little like George Burns in *O God*, or Morgan Freeman in *Bruce Almighty*. Sometimes as we think about God, it’s interesting how we can conceptualize God—a little bumbling, perhaps, like George Burns, or a little more dignified, like Morgan Freeman. Sometimes it’s even easy to think of God a little like a teddy bear—a God who loves us and who we can just go to to get that love. He’ll hang out until we’re ready for him.

Now, I wouldn’t say that we would never want to think about God in any of these ways. God presents God’s self in a lot of ways. But if we limit ourselves to a teddy bear God or one of those other conceptions, I do wonder whether we get the fullness of who God is. When we hear the psalmist say, “Who is a God like you?” it’s a little bit more than a teddy bear hanging out with us.

As we get some of these images from the scriptures today—the cloud and the glory in the tabernacle or that fire by night—there’s something incredible about those images. Or as we see Jesus transfigured on the mount, he becomes brilliant, dazzling. Think about God a little bit more that way. A God that is brilliant, dazzling, full of energy, speaking with power. That’s an incredible God. There’s something astounding about that God. It adds a little bit more to our conception of God when we think of that God. So we see in these images of God a God who is incredible, a God who is not easily manipulated or dealt with.

We might look to Paul. Paul suggests that it’s not only those conceptions we might have of God’s being—the brilliance, the incredible energy, the voice speaking out of heaven. Paul says he is unsearchable and inscrutable. Unsearchable is pretty clear. We can’t go and find God easily. I happen to like the word inscrutable as well. The idea is you can’t trace him down, you can’t figure him out. God is not easy to understand. Not only is the nature, the being, of God hard to understand and incredible beyond our imagination, but how God works, the mind of God, is impressive beyond our understanding.

The thing that comes up for me when I hear those descriptions is the way in which they are easy to say, but then when it comes to life, you hear that question: If God is so incredible, where is he? Part of me wants to say, just look around. This world is incredible. We just get used to it. But the other part of me says, “Let’s look at these stories about God showing the incredible nature of God.” What is God doing when God shows that incredible nature with the Israelites? They are going into this unknown experience. They are going into the wilderness. They have been slaves for years.

They are being asked to change their existence. But the incredible nature of God comes along to encourage them as they go into the wilderness, to lead them. And what's happening on the mountain when Jesus is transfigured? Again, I think that God is showing up to encourage Christ and perhaps the disciples as well.

What we don't see God doing is using his incredible nature to come along and say, "You have to do this." In fact we say things like, "I wish God would make me believe, or at least make things the way I want them to be, make things happen." God doesn't tend to do that a lot. It's all in that word *make*. You see, when God comes around to show his incredible nature, he is encouraging. He's not coming to *make* people do things. There is an incredible mercy in this, for us not to simply be slaves or puppets. We need not be forced to live our lives a certain way. So we see in God's greatness a mercy that invites instead. It invites us on the journey through life. It invites us to know that he is God. It's an inviting, a mercy we see coming out of the wonder of who this God is.

Why think about that greatness of God, the incredible nature of God? Because I think it's important for us as we begin to think about whom it is we're following. It's so easy for me to want to make God into a teddy bear, or to make God into simply the one I go to who solves my problems. When I have a problem I can go to God to get it solved, but otherwise, do I want to think much about God? If God is as incredible as I'm claiming him to be, there's something to go to. There's one who is present, who will invite, who shows us mercy in that way. It's in remembering the wonder of God, this incredible nature of God, that I can begin to have a confidence that draws me beyond myself.

It's interesting to note what happened to the disciples when they encountered God. They fell down in fear and Jesus had to say, "Don't be afraid. Look up." Then they not only get to look up, but then they have time to assimilate that as they go back down the mountain. So as we think about the incredible nature of God, I want to suggest there are some ways it relates to us.

First, it pulls us out of our own little space. It pulls us to think beyond "my stuff." It reminds me a little bit of my nephew, who was struggling with his mother and turned to her and said, "I'm in charge of my own life!" So often, that feels like where I'm at. I want to be in charge of my own life, and yet I realize that when I try to do that, I don't always do it that well. When I do that, the other thing I find that I do is begin to circumscribe the world. I begin to make it a small sphere, a place I can handle. It may not be real, but at least I know what it's like. What God is inviting us to do is to look up, to look beyond myself, to recognize that by having somebody as great as God there I can do that. I can look up, look beyond myself. One of the things I think we see when we do that is God's invitation into life. So I think in knowing the greatness of God, it's an invitation to look up and an invitation to life. That invitation may make me recognize that it's not just about what I bring to God, not just about my agenda. It may sometimes be God's agenda. But it's an invitation to move out into life beyond and in that to recognize the mercy that a God as great as this invites us to look up and to live into life as God's

invitation, and there's real mercy in that. He's not forcing us to do things, but inviting us and leading us.

That's why Paul writes so much about the mercy of God in this particular piece of scripture. Through God's mercy we begin to see the riches of God (the things of God, all creation), the wisdom of God (God knows how things work), and the knowledge of God (God knows not only how things work, but the things themselves). We are invited to know that God through God's mercy, the God for whom all things are "from him and through him and to him," as it says in Romans.

We have the opportunity to go off and do our own thing. In that there's a mercy, because God is not forcing us to follow. But when we recognize the wonder of who God is, we find that there is a mercy that helps us look up, invites us and leads us into life. I think it begins in part by remembering the wonder of who God is, the incredible nature of a God who is beyond our imagination. Brilliant, full of energy, beautiful—all kinds of ways we can only begin to describe God because God is indescribable. It is out of that recognition of God's greatness, how great God is, that we are called to look up and to live into and to know the mercy of God.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, help us to look up and remember how wonderful you are. Forgive us when we try to domesticate you, or manipulate you, or think you are just something that we can go to when we need something. Help us to know that you are with us, and will guide us, and are incredible. Lord, remind us again of how great you are, and that it is through your greatness that you give us mercy. You help us look up and live life. Thank you. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.