Sunday, January 27, 2002
THE FACE OF GOD
Psalm 27:1,4-9; Matthew 4:18-23

When someone asks me to state my basic beliefs about God in a few brief sentences, I usually reply: I believe that God is the Creator of all that is. Because God is good and God is love, God made the creation good, and God made each one of us good. God creates each human being in God's image. God's original blessing, which is a part of God's goodness, is more powerful than any sin or evil. I also believe that God's creation is not finished. God is still actively creating.

Then I go on to say: In Jesus, we see and experience the love of God in a unique way. God so loved the world that God lived among us as a human being. I believe that God was in Jesus when he was crucified, dead, and buried. This means that God was in the tomb and that God was in death with Jesus. And when we say in the Apostle's Creed, "He descended into hell," God was there too with Jesus. This is good news because it tells us that God is with us when we are in the most hellish parts of our lives, when we are in the abyss, when we are in the deepest grief and suffering the most, and that God is with us in death. I also believe the Spirit of God, as experienced in the risen Christ, still lives among us for guidance, for comfort, and for strength. In Jesus, we see and know the "face of God."

The "face of God" is an intriguing and mysterious metaphor. It's used hundreds of times in the Bible, in the Hebrew scriptures, which we call the Old Testament, and in the New Testament. There are a number of stories in the Bible about individuals who want to see the "face of God," and we are told in some of those stories about those who have seen the "face of God." In the 27th Psalm, the poet makes this request: "Hear O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! 'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!' Your face, O Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me."

In the Book of Exodus, there's an unusual story about Moses, who has experienced the call and power of God. We are told in chapter 33, verse 11, that "God used to speak to Moses face to face, as one who speaks to a friend." In this story, Moses knows that God is angry with the Hebrews because they have made a golden calf and have been worshiping it. So Moses is trying to mediate between God and the people who have disobeyed God. In his conversation with God, Moses said to God, "Show me your glory, I pray." In other words, "Show me your face." Moses wanted to be sure that he was on good terms with God again. However, in this instance, God told Moses, "You cannot see my face." Then God told Moses to go and stand in a particular place on the mountain, in a cleft of a rock, and when God's glory passes by, God will cover Moses with his hand so that Moses will not be able to see God's face. Then God said, "I will take away my hand once I have passed by and you shall see my backside, but my face shall not be seen."

The point of the story is that sometimes you can see and know God face to face, and at other times, God is mysterious, and you can only see God's backside. You cannot always see the "face of God" on demand. There are also times when you may not want to see the "face of God." If you are feeling especially guilty or unworthy, then God's presence is too powerful for you to face. You experience the same feelings in your human relationships. If you have wronged someone and you feel especially guilty about it, it's difficult to face that person again. Or if someone has hurt you, you might not want to see that person's face again. You've heard someone say, "I can never face that person again."

We use the word “face” in everyday metaphors even when not talking about God. We talk about “losing face,” which means losing respectability or honor. And we talk about “saving face,” which means the opposite. The Bible also uses the word “face” in similar ways. In the book of Ecclesiastes, we are told, “A person’s wisdom makes her face shine.” In the book of Proverbs, we are warned, “A wicked person puts on a bold face.”

It’s an old concept that your face is what you are. It is what distinguishes you from others. Your face is your individuality. It expresses, more than any other part of your body, your personality, your demeanor, your mood. In some cultures, even today, traditional dress covers people from head to toe, so that the face is all that’s visible. And in some of these same cultures, women are required to also cover their faces partially or completely. Maybe it’s because to see a person’s face is the first step toward knowing that person more intimately.

You’ve probably noticed too, that when you want to hide from someone or several people, the first thing you do is to try to cover your face. When you play the game of “peek-a-boo” with little children, all you need to do is to cover your face or the child’s face.

Part of the fun of wearing a mask at a party or some other event is that it’s a way of putting on a different face. You enjoy being another person for a short time.

Now let’s talk more about the face of God. The metaphor of the face of God is found throughout the Bible. It represents what people can and cannot know about God. If you say you have seen God’s face, it is a way of expressing a form of intimacy with God.

I mentioned Moses earlier. Here are a few more examples from other Bible stories. When Jacob wrestles all night with an angel and has his name changed to Israel, he names the place where the wrestling took place “Peniel,” which means “the face of God.” He said, “For I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved.”

In another Biblical passage, we get the much-loved benediction: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” (Numbers 6:24-26)

The Apostle Paul, in that beautiful “love” poem in I Corinthians 13, says in a part of it: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I will understand fully even as I have been fully understood.”

In the Bible, we are told that God’s face shines like the sun, giving light, warmth, direction — but it can blind and burn those who get too close. There is both intimacy and mystery in the face of God.

I believe that each human being has a built-in need to be connected to the ultimate. This need for intimacy with the sacred or the holy is one of our deepest human longings. We want to see God’s face. We are, as one person put it, “wired for God.” We have a need for the spirit in us to know and to express its unity with all things. That’s what the writer of Psalm 27 was expressing: “‘Come,’ my heart says, ‘seek God’s face.’ Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me.”

One note of caution: because we want to know God so much, sometimes our need to connect with an accessible God can cause us to make God too small and too accessible. There is a

sense in which any God you can fully grasp with your understanding is too small. Any God who exists primarily to do errands for you and your little group of like-minded people is less than God. Growth in the Spirit is a continual process of breaking and reforming your understanding of God. You want God to be intimate, to have a face; but you also need to know that God is ultimate, a mystery beyond your complete comprehension. God may be close and intimate, but God is never under your control.

I believe you can see and experience the face of God in many ways. For Christians, the primary face of God is the face of Jesus. Therefore, if you are a Christian, you cannot talk about God for very long without talking about Jesus. He is the face of God because he is our interface with God.

It is significant, however, that we do not know what the face of Jesus looked like. There were no drawings or paintings made of him while he was living among us. Sometimes I wish there had been, but most of the time, I'm grateful there are none. If I were sure that a certain painting of Jesus was an authentic one, that would remove too much of the mystery around him and too much of the mystery of God. At the same time, I believe that the people he called to be his disciples followed him willingly because they saw in him the face of God.

I also believe that Jesus taught them, and us, to know the face of God in many other ways in everyday life. A main part of the purpose of the church is to help people come to know the face of God, that is, to know God intimately. It was Jesus who reminded us that we are "to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves." When you do that, you are experiencing the face of God in your neighbor, and your neighbor is experiencing the face of God in you.

You can come to experience the face of God when you understand not only that Jesus is the face of God, but in addition, that he saw the face of God in others because he knew, as you and I know, even though we often forget, that each human being is created in God's image. Therefore, Jesus saw the face of God in Zacchaeus, the tax collector, whereas his critics did not see the face of God there. He saw the face of God in the woman who was brought before him because she had been caught in the act of adultery. Those who brought her and were about to stone her to death certainly did not see the face of God in her.

Jesus saw the face of God in the Samaritan woman he met at the well, and in each leper that he had compassion on and healed. He also saw the face of God in the people he called to be his closest followers.

Here's an assignment to do this coming week: Look for the face of God. Here are some places where I see and have seen the face of God. I see God's face in the beauty of God's creation — in the wide open prairies, in the rivers and mountains, in the wildflowers that bloom and in the cultivated flowers and plants in the gardens we create. I see the face of God in the smiles of little children and in newborn babies. I see the face of God in the wrinkled faces of longer-living people. I have seen the face of God in a loving spouse who took care of her husband who had been ill for 20 years, and in the husband who took care of his wife in sickness and in health. I have seen the face of God in those who are persecuted for the sake of justice.

Sometimes I have seen the face of God in my enemies. Maybe that's why Jesus advised us to love our enemies. My list could go on and on, and I only mention these few places where I see the face of God to start you in your thinking as you begin to compose your list. If you are married and have children, it could be a good topic for a family discussion.

There are times too when you might experience the face of God in your deepest times of suffering, when, as A.A. says, “you have hit the bottom.” Years ago, a woman in another parish told me about the time she saw the face of God. Although her name was not Marie, that’s the name I’ll use to protect her confidentiality. Marie was in a depression and had lost hope because of an unexpected accident, which resulted in her also losing her job because of her injuries and her long, slow period of recovery. Her recovery was a painful one, both physically and mentally. She came to the conclusion that there wasn’t much use in her staying alive. She considered taking her life as an option.

One night, when she was alone in her small apartment, she thought of herself as being like a dull, maimed child. Earlier in the evening, a close friend of hers had stopped by for a visit. Her friend didn’t say much that evening because she knew words wouldn’t help. She simply sat there holding Marie’s hand. She didn’t stay long, maybe 30 minutes. As she was getting ready to leave, she asked Marie if she would join her in a brief prayer. Marie agreed. The words of her friend’s prayer were simple. She prayed that Marie would be open to the peace of God, which passes all understanding.

When her friend left, Marie did not get up from her chair or make any move toward seeing her out. She sat there with the passivity of a six-year-old, not knowing what to do next. She said that she had never felt so totally alone and terrified. The longer she sat, the more hopeless she felt. Finally, she stood up and began to walk back and forth in her small living room. She was sure this was the end. She was ready to die.

Then, at her lowest point, she felt in some small corner of her mind that she did not want to die. She wanted to live. But how? She heard herself say, “I want, I want... O God!” As she formed the words, in that very instant, she was aware of a comforting light surrounding her, and she sensed within herself a kind of joy, an ecstasy she could never find the words to describe. It was a wonderful feeling of “Presence,” which all of her life she had been seeking.

Then the feeling passed, but the sense of God’s presence remained calmly and quietly within her. She was filled with a peace such as she had never known before. In her own words, she had seen and felt the “face of God.” From that time on, she began to rebuild her life. All of her problems were not solved instantly. She still knew pain. She had a lot of work to do. But she knew she was not alone. Amen.