

## **God Is: Ground**

*Rev. John Allen*

One of my favorite things we do in our Confirmation is an exercise I call “Images of God.”

It comes fairly early in our time together. I have several printed images, cut out, arranged randomly on a table in the center of the room.

Some flags blowing in the wind, a tree with it’s roots in the water, a painting of a woman cradling the Earth in her arms. A photo of nebulas taken through the Hubble Telescope.

I ask the students to look at all the images for a minute. And then to select one to be their “Image of God.” Don’t overthink it, just grab the one that stands out to you.

Now what is interesting to me is that I always also include the image of God from the Sistine Chapel ceiling. The white bearded man, in the flowing white robes stretching out his arm...

I have taught confirmation 4 times, to about 70 students total. And no one has ever chose that image.

The chose pictures of children holding hands. Or a sunset. Or stormy ocean waves.

And we go around and share why we chose each image, and the insights are always profound. They tell us something about how we see God. Where we encounter God. How we know God.

The last time we did this exercise, seeing the diversity of images the students chose, a thought struck me that haunted me since.

Who is God?

I looked back over my sermons, and I realized that I tend to talk a lot about what God does. God heals. God loves. God welcomes. God embraces. God complicates. God holds. God hopes. God weeps. God transforms. God calls. God challenges.

A lot about what God does.

But who is God?

When we are young, our image of God is kind of just a bigger and better version of a person. Someone who perhaps lives up in the clouds, who makes big decisions and does big things.

Who is stronger than us, but still strong in the way a person is strong.

Who sees more than us, but still sees the way we see.

Who knows everything, but still knows in the way we know.

Perhaps this God makes the weather, and decides who will win baseball games.

Maybe we hope that this God will make our sick grandmother better again.

We learn to talk to God. If we are really faithful we may even learn to listen for God.

But then something happens.

The weather stinks, or your team loses.

Or grandma dies.

Or God stops speaking.

Perhaps some tragedy befalls the world that you can't imagine why God wouldn't prevent.

Perhaps some evil persists that you believe a just God should have long ago interrupted.

And if God is not powerful enough to stop the bad things, or worse yet, chooses to let them happen, then we want no part.

And we walk away.

Versions of this story play out every day.

The image of God as an all-powerful entity sitting up in the clouds fails. It doesn't hold up to reality. It isn't intellectually credible given all else we know, and so someone walks away.

And knowing the rate at which this happens breaks my heart, because I think so often those folks walk away, simply for want of a different image.

Paul Tillich, a great Christian theologian in the 20th Century said, that atheism is not really wholesale rejection of God. It is the rejection of a traditional, and simplistic, image of God.

A rejection of the man in the robe painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

And it breaks my heart because, when push comes to shove, nobody ever picks that image anyway.

So here is what I would like to do.

Like I told you, that question has haunted me. This reality has haunted me. So for the next three weeks, I am going to offer three Sermons that will offer three new images of God.

Each of these images has gifts to offer us. And none is complete on its own.

Like the images that I spread out on the table in confirmation, these images might tell us something about God, but no one image can tell us everything about God.

This week, I offer an image from Paul Tillich, the theologian I mentioned earlier. He suggests that we should best imagine God as what he calls “the ground of being.” That is instead of looking up, and beyond, for our encounter with the Holy, we should look deep into things.

He imagines God not as some mighty and strong being who lives far away, but rather, God as being itself, the very foundation upon which all is built. Such that the more closely, the more intimately you encounter the intricacies of things, the more you encounter the holiness that lies at their heart. Their core. Their very essence.

The nature of God does not live up in the clouds far away, but rather tucked between the atoms that make up you and me.

God's presence infuses our connections with one another. It animates our love. It gives us inspiration. It allows us to experience beauty.

This insight is, I think, what we are trying to get at when we say that God is everywhere.

So perhaps that image is a fruitful one for you. God as the ground. The ground from which all grows. The ground in which everything is rooted.

As the Apostle Paul says so beautifully. "God is the one in whom we live, and move, and have our being. Not beyond us. But all around us. Always."

Or as our scripture reading from this morning puts it: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being."



Now I'll admit that this can all sound a bit poly-annish. A little pie in the sky. And Tillich faced plenty of critics who felt that sometimes he sounded more like a hippie than a serious theologian. Holiness and beauty infusing everything, everywhere.

But Tillich's image of God as the ground in which all being has its being, was hard won. He had witnessed some of the worst that humanity could muster while serving as a Chaplain to the German Army during World War I. Certainly not an experience of beauty. Or sacredness.

After the war he enjoyed a very prominent place teaching at the University of Frankfurt, that is until he was dismissed from his post because his teachings ran afoul of the ascendant Nazi Party.

Seeing the writing on the wall, he came to Union Seminary in New York to teach and work as Germany was overtaken by fascism.

In the face of that life, suddenly to me his beautiful image of God's holiness infusing everything suddenly takes on a different tint.

Because what he had witnessed in war was the cruelty men are capable of when they lose sight of the holiness in the life of their enemies.

He saw God's beautiful Earth marred by trenches and craters because power, and nation, and pride became more compelling draws than peace and justice.

And then he watched as his own people, one after the next, forgot that God's holiness dwells within all people. No matter their race. Their religion. Or their creed.

And he watched from across the sea, as the twisted and hateful Nazi ideology dealt death to God's children by the millions.

And while most people response to such epic catastrophes was to pray for some similarly epic divine intervention, something that would wipe evil off the Earth once and for all.

Tillich kept writing: see the presence of God in everyone. Look for the face of God in the face of your enemy.

See the beauty in other people's homes.

Know that God is present in every land.

Discover that God's spirit moves in the faith of every human heart.

Look. Look. Not up and beyond. But deep in. Into one another. Into yourself.

All the way down to the ground of it all, and you will find God there every time.

No matter how different someone might seem.

No matter what your image of their land or how they live.

No matter how vehemently you disagree with them.

Look.

See.

Holiness.

At the heart of all of it.

People mostly thought that in the face of the colossal weight of history falling on that moment that he was being silly to talk about such things.

But I think he was onto something.

And I think it might just be what we need now. More than anything.