

Hope in Christ

Isaiah 64: 1-9; I Corinthians 1: 3-9

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What does God look like? A little girl in grade 2 was at school in her desk drawing a picture. Her teacher came up to her and asked her what she was drawing. The girl responded that she was drawing God. The teacher responded by saying that nobody knows what God looks like. The little girl responded that they will know when she is finished her drawing. In her mind, she was confidently drawing a picture of God!

At some point, I think we all have imagined what God would look like, or what he is like. For example, we have a picture of God in our mind as someone kind, or someone who is powerful yet tender. Some of you may have an idea of God as being aloof from the world -and does not really care about this world or the people who live here.

Remembering and waiting: Let's look back to our Old Testament reading. The Israelite people's world was upside down! Things were going very wrong, and they could not go on much longer. They were losing hope. The prophet Isaiah was prophesying against the lifestyle of the Israelites (his fellow countrymen), but he was also hoping and praying that their suffering would stop soon! This remnant of Israel wanted God, with all his creative power, to immediately save them from their Babylonian captives and deliver them back home. They were appealing to what God had done in the past, when they had been delivered from their Egyptian captors. They were desperate and waiting for God but they wanted him to come immediately!

We have stories in our lives about God intervening in a big way. Perhaps at the time it was so real, but as time passed the memory faded. Why is the memory fading? What picture of God do you have on a daily basis?

In Isaiah 64: 4, we read that the prophet Isaiah was talking about the God of Israel who is like no other: ***“From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.”*** He is the God who comes to those who wait for Him. Those who wait for God have a relationship of love and forgiveness with God. Those who wait for God reach out to others as God has reached out to them.

Confession: The end of verse 5 and in verse 6 Isaiah speaks about how God was angry with His people. Then the prophet delivered a confession on behalf of the people saying they were unclean and their good deeds amounted to 'filthy rags' (in other words these 'good deeds' are worse than useless). The Israelites were worshipping God in his temple, but their crime was that the worship did not translate into their daily lives. During the week they cheated the poor and vulnerable and spoke ill about them. In today's context it would be similar to going to church every Sunday, but then during the week you have little regard or care for your fellow human being (your neighbour). The people slowly became aware of this sin and were repentant. However, in the act of repentance, regret and prayer, troubles do not suddenly disappear, but one's vision is lifted in hope beyond human helplessness (or feeling sorry for oneself) to our heavenly parent. Consider this: If human parents cannot remain unresponsive to their child asking for forgiveness, how much more would our heavenly parent (God) respond by forgiving us?

The Israelites were suffering from slow repentance. ***“There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity (sin) Isaiah 64: 7.*** The children of God did not see that they had sinned. God allowed the punishment to happen because of their unwillingness to acknowledge their sins. The Israelites did not follow the commands of God to love God and to love their neighbour. Throughout the Old Testament, the Israelites were implicated, not so much by their lack of worshipping God, but how they had forgotten God’s commands to love God and their neighbour. They treated others badly. They ignored the poor, the sick and the lonely. A question for all of us to consider: Do I follow God’s commands for my life? Where do you stand?

Keep in mind that your life is not your own. In verse 8, Isaiah speaks out boldly about the identity of the people of God, ***“Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter. We are the work of your hand.”*** In reflection on this verse, I want to quote from The Heidelberg catechism from the reformed church of which the Presbyterian Church is affiliated - (question and answer 1): ***“What is your only comfort in life and death? Answer: That I am not my own, but belong body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.”*** Since you belong to God, your life is not your own to do as you please. Since you belong to God, your life, and the life of others is intrinsically valuable. You love and care for others as God does; you notice others as equal children of God as God does – regardless of race or religion.

As the image of the potter suggests, we are created by God and belong to God! You are known by God, created by God, belonging to God, and called by God to do good things. Do not be like the Israelites who forgot their identity. When you reach out to others, you see the image of God in others – you see God!

God is faithful! In our New Testament scripture for today, Paul states in I Corinthians 1: 3-9 that God is faithful and he came to us in Jesus Christ! Remember that He sent Jesus to be born and live among us; Jesus showed the loving face of God; suffered and was killed; and had risen from the dead to defeat hate, inequality, racism, injustice and death itself and anything that leads to death. Through coming to earth and being born in Bethlehem, God set in motion healing for the world where no one is greater than another, and those made in God’s image learn to love one another in spite of their differences. All are equal brothers and sisters made in his image and belonging to God. When we love one another, we see God in them. ***We know more of what God looks like because we see God in others. We do not need to go far to see God!***

We all have the power to move the church and the world forward into love and unity by stepping out of our private comfort zone and greeting our neighbours, helping our neighbour - even our enemies! We as members and adherents of the church today each have this responsibility to build bridges with others. When we are obedient to his command to love God and neighbour – not only will our church change, but the world will change and you will see more of God in the world! This brings the hope of Christ to the world. ***We can all be carriers of hope by showing the picture of who God is to the world.*** Reach out your hand today with the face of Christ to others! When you reach out as God does to us, the picture of God is also clearer to you. Amen.