

“Call to Arms”
May 3, 2009
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Do you remember your earliest thoughts of what God *looked* like? How did you first imagine God? Did God look like the picture of Jesus downstairs? Or like the sunlight breaking over an early morning mountaintop? Maybe you first imagined God looking like a family members or friend.

One of my earliest memories is when I drew a picture of God and shared it with my mom. I want to recreate it now. I think I was about six or so when I drew it the first time. I'll walk you through what I remember thinking about God as I draw it. First of all, God is a spirit, right? God wouldn't have a body like ordinary humans. So God's body would have to look sort of like a ghost. A little bit like those three ghosts that were always picking on Casper. Casper was too cute, and God needed to be more serious than him, so God got the pointy ghost body instead of the little kid legs like Casper.

God is very powerful—so the arms would need to look tough. I couldn't draw muscles then, but I knew that superheroes always had their arms up—they were always swinging through the air or surprising a bad guy. So, God's arms were raised like he was in the middle of some action.

I have to admit, there was something maybe a little scary about God to me. So, as far as a face went, well the expression would be important. God couldn't be smiling, right? That would be too much like Casper again. So, God had to scowl...downturned lips... slightly angry eyes...and there you have God. Oh, one more thing. The way you could tell it was God, and not *just* an angry ghost is—of course—the cross. It was right in the middle of the church, so why not right on the front of God? And voila...my earliest image of God.

I think it says a lot that I picked up this image of God. I only went to church a handful of times as a boy. Yet somehow, even in that limited exposure I picked up that God was powerful, angry, and unlike humans. As I grew older, and as my family drew away from the church, that image intensified. In part thanks to the growth of the so-called Moral Majority—who professed to hold the only *correct* understanding of God. According to them, God didn't want the Equal Rights Amendment to pass. According to them, God condemned gays and lesbians. According to them, God sent most people to Hell. In their view, God was leading a battle against human sin and only the Moral Majority was responding to the call to arms to stop it.

It wasn't just the Moral Majority, of course. Throughout history images of God have focused on anger, judgment and smiting. The Bible itself fuels some of this. “Vengeance is mine, I will

repay, says the Lord...¹ writes the Apostle Paul in Romans, quoting the book of Deuteronomy.² However, my deepest faith calls me to understand these particular moments as human misinterpretations of the Lord, rather than actual quotations of our good and loving God. I believe that they are holdovers of primitive understandings of divine action gathered from the cultures around both the proto-Israelites and the community of the early Christian Church. The gods and goddesses of the ancient near East and Greece and Rome were prone to moments of human failing. They lusted, they killed, and they called their people to arms against other cultures and people. They embodied all my childhood fears of God—they were angry, powerful and more than a little scary.

The superhero pose of my earliest God image, with the raised up arms, is brought to mind by the beginning of this morning's passage from Isaiah. "See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him."³ It seems that the prophet may be alluding to those ancient images of God as conquering warrior, but then something amazing happens. The image shifts its emphasis. God's upraised arm is not the arm of a warrior, but that of a shepherd. The powerful arm of God is used to *feed* the flock of Israel "like a shepherd... gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep."⁴ The recompense—the repayment—of God is not vengeance, but a people to care for and love. God is not a warrior, but a loving guide.

Jesus taps into *this* understanding of God when he calls himself the *good* shepherd. He came at a time when his people were surrounded by military power. They were put down, oppressed, and penned in by the upraised arm and sure authority of the Roman Empire. And many of the people of Christ's time believed that they heard a call to arms from their God to throw off the yoke of their burden. Various revolutionaries plotted violence against Rome, and made several attempts on the lives of Roman soldiers and Jewish sympathizers. But Jesus embodied a different model. He was the *good* shepherd, and the arms he calls us all to are his own arms: not raised up in the violent posture of ancient warrior gods, but open wide. To gather the lambs and to lead the rest of the flock beside the still waters and tender greens of the abundant life which he revealed to us in Communion.

He gave it to us on the very night of the betrayal, when things could not be worse for Jesus, and the Disciples couldn't have failed him more. And friends, this is God's deepest message to us: whenever we feel we are at the end of our ropes, whenever we feel most broken, whenever it seems that things could not get worse—life abundant is waiting for us. Not in some "pie in the sky" time too far down the road to see, but *right now!* Christ wants to guide us to green pastures

¹ Romans 12:19

² Deuteronomy 32:35.

³ Isaiah 40:10 a-b.

⁴ Isaiah 40:11.

and still waters, and the rest and calm of Sabbath *right now!* The arms we are called are not the ways of violence and power, but the tender and loving embrace of our Savior whenever we need it. And that's the good news of the whole Bible this morning!

Amen?

Psalm 23

1The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

2He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

3he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

4Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.

5You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

6Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Isaiah 40:10-11

¹⁰See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

John 10:11-16

11“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.