

The Power of a Picture

1. Warm up: When you were a kid, maybe 7 years old, if someone had asked you what God is like, what would you have said?
2. From the beginning of time, we humans have been trying to figure out what God is like. And we've come up with some pretty crazy ideas. In ancient times, we imagined that God – or the gods, plural – were a lot like us, only far more powerful, which is a scary thought. Imagine us with a whole lot more power! That's how ancient people saw God.
 - a. Jeff gave the example of the first-century Roman understanding of God as Zeus, the king of the gods, who used his power to ruthlessly protect his own self-interest. For example, when Prometheus, moved with compassion for humanity, stole fire from the gods and shared it with humans, Zeus punished Prometheus by chaining him to a rock where an eagle would eat his liver each day. Zeus also punished humans for accepting the gift of fire by sending us Pandora's box, which when opened, unleashed every imaginable evil on humanity. Why do you think ancient people so readily embraced such a ruthless understanding of God?
 - b. In ancient times, for most people *the* defining characteristic of the gods was self-interest. They used brute force to get what they wanted. As a result, worshiping the gods was all about fear and appeasement, not love or goodness. As you look back over life, have you ever been stuck in that of kind primitive understanding of God? If so, how did you get there, and what did it feel like to see God that way?
 - c. If the gods, who are supposed to be *the* gold standard for how we should behave, were themselves amoral beings who used their power to pursue their own narrow self-interest, that meant it was ok for us humans to do the same. And that gets pretty ugly pretty quickly. The ancient world was brutal, but so is our modern world. In Colossians 1:21, Paul describes us humans as “estranged [from God and each other] and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.” Our human capacity for evil is powerful. What's one of the most evil acts you've ever witnessed?
3. Our Scripture passage for this week describes a critical turning point in the human understanding of God that occurred when Jesus came to earth to give us a graphic picture of what God is truly like. The passage begins by describing Jesus' exalted status in heaven, as the Son of God, before he came to us, then goes on to describe why he came to us and what he did for us. Read together Colossians 1:15-27, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. This passage tells us that the fullness of God dwelled in Jesus and that, as such, he was the principal force in the creation of heaven and earth and the one who holds it all together. In short, as the Son of God, Jesus had all the rights and privileges of divinity. Yet he gave it all up to come to us as an ordinary human with all the limitations that entails. Jeff compared Jesus' decision to become a human to us

deciding to become a dog or cat. Suppose you knew that the dogs or cats of the world had lost their way and that the only way to save them was to become one of them, would you? Before answering, as a group make a list of all the things a human would have to give up to become a cat or dog. Then tells us whether you'd do it if necessary to save dogs or cats – and explain your answer.

- b. Why do you think Jesus was willing to give up everything to become one of us?
 - c. While living among us, Jesus gave us a graphic image of what God is really like. His portrait of God was revolutionary. At a time when the gods' chief characteristic was thought to be protecting their self-interests, Jesus modeled self-sacrifice, i.e., *agape* love. For you personally, what's one of your favorite stories of Jesus, and what does that story tell us about what God is like?
 - d. Jeff shared the story of a Franciscan priest interred in Auschwitz who volunteered to die in the place of a Polish sergeant. The commandant granted his request. Can you imagine yourself ever doing such a thing? Why or why not? What thoughts or feelings does that story stir inside of you?
 - e. Are you able to believe – and feel – that God loves you enough to actually die for you? Explain your answer.
 - f. Colossians 1:20 says, “Through Jesus God was pleased to reconcile to God’s self all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, Jesus has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death.” If you were asked to explain how Jesus’ death made it possible for us to reconcile with God, what would you say?
4. Colossians 1:26 says, “The mystery [of who God is and what God is like] that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations . . . has now been revealed to the Lord’s people [by Jesus]. Through them God has chosen to make known to the Gentiles [i.e., unbelievers] how great . . . are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is **Christ in you, the hope of glory**.” In other words, people living in our time are now supposed to see Christ in us so they too can understand “the riches of the glory of the mystery” of who God really is. God has now chosen us to be a living, breathing picture of Jesus. You may be the only Jesus someone ever sees.
- a. Have you ever encountered a religious person who was so off putting they almost pushed you away from God? Tell us about them. What happened?
 - b. Have you ever encountered a person of faith who was so beautiful it drew you toward God and caused you to want what they had? Tell us about them.

- c. Jeff closed with this question: What kind of God do people see in you? How would you answer that question?

Colossians 1:15-27, selected verses

15 Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to God's self all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross.

21 And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²²he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him.

²⁵I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to the Lord's people. ²⁷Through them God has chosen to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.