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WHAT DOES GOD LOOK LIKE? Michael B. Beough
Exodus 33:17-23; I Timothy 1:17; I John 3:2-3 January 18, 2009
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Aren't children's questions wonderful! "What does God look like?" sounds so simple and so naïve. Yet, this question and others in this series have sent me searching the Bible, looking in theological books, going online, and even reading in the Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

What I have come away with is this. For a child, this question means what it says. "I hear all of you grownups talking about God this and God that. Show me God so I can know whom you are talking about."

Well, let's be honest. Wouldn't we all like to see God? There is a website called godisimaginary.com. The main proof that God is imaginary, says this website, is that no one can see God. God never shows up. If you can't see God, it is because there is no god. That is rather sophomoric logic, but it challenges what many of us wish for. To see God.

I think we have to be careful with this child's question. The Bible says God is a Spirit. I Timothy 1:17 says God is invisible. The Westminster Confession of Faith in our *Book of Confessions* says, "*There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty;*" and so on and so forth. Okay, we get the point. Right? But we do not want our children to conclude that because God is invisible, God is therefore imaginary.

When I was a child, my family occasionally ate out at a Mexican food restaurant. The restaurant had palm trees inside, and they offered me a great opportunity to tease my younger sister. On one of our outings, I started pretending there was a monkey in the palm trees just behind her. I looked up and made some kind of face and yelled, "Look! There's a monkey!" She fell for it. Big time. I kept doing it over and over. Every time she looked, of course, I would say, "Oops, the monkey is gone." She wanted to see that monkey so bad. She started crying because she couldn't see the monkey. I loved teasing my sister! Finally, my parents had enough. They turned to her and said, "There is no monkey." But you know what? She kept looking for the monkey, but she never saw it because it was both invisible and imaginary.

Since God is real, I don't want any of our children to end up thinking God is just an imaginary monkey. What a loss that would be for them! What a loss it would be for us! God is the most real thing in the universe. There is nothing else like the experience of God in your life. When you experience God, you know God is real. When you come to know God,

you will never doubt God's existence. When God takes over your life, there is no other life like it.

So, let's go a little deeper.

One of the most interesting Bible stories about the appearance of God is in Exodus 33. Moses has just come down off Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments in his arms. He finds his people worshipping a golden calf. In disgust, he throws the tablets of stone on the ground and breaks them into pieces. Then he calls together the Levites, and they slaughter all the sinners, about three thousand people. Then Moses goes back to God, confessing their sin, and does an odd thing. He asks God to forgive the people, and God does it.

Here is how God proves that He has forgiven them. He tells Moses to round up the people and get them moving again toward the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Guess what Moses does? He demands that God show himself so there would be no question that God was real and that God was with them. "Let me see you," Moses says. In verse 18, he actually demands, "Now show me your glory." *Before I stick my neck out again for these people, I want proof.*

And God does an amazing thing. God puts Moses in a crack in a rock and promises to pass by. Moses will get to see the very nature of God – God's goodness, mercy, and compassion. Moses will hear God's name. And Moses will get to see God. But the only thing Moses will get to see is God's backsides, because no one can look on the face of God and live.

Some think it is because the purity of God would have incinerated Moses like a bug flying into the flame of a candle. Human sinfulness and God's perfection on a collision course.

There is a more biblical reason. Because humans who think they have seen God are impossible to live with. Pretty soon, you start thinking you can speak for God.

And in some ways, that accounts for the divisions among humans, and among nations. It accounts for terrible things that are done in the name of gods. We think we have seen God, or we think we know what God looks like and who God is, and before long God starts looking and thinking a lot like us. We even go to war against others who have turned their god into a god like them. Blessed be the name of our gods!

Why do you think the Ten Commandments prohibit the making of idols to represent God? Exodus 20:3-4 says, "*You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol.*" Why is that?

Because of our temptation to reduce God to what we can comprehend and control. To reduce God to just a bigger one of us.

What we want our children to know is that the God of the Bible exceeds all our capacity to capture Him in any form, whether human or otherwise. God refuses to let us turn Him into an idol of our own making. Presbyterians in the 16th Century even refused to have paintings and statues in their churches. All those wonderful Italian Renaissance paintings and statues Teresa and I saw in Italy last year would have looked like idols to the Presbyterian reformers in the 16th century.

What we learn from this story of Moses is that God made Himself visible in the likeness of a person for Moses' sake. But making Himself visible in human form was an exception and limited. Not even Moses got to see the face of God.

Here is the bottom line. We cannot see God as He is because our minds simply cannot capture within it this infinity of being. All we can see and know is what God chooses to reveal to us, and even then we cannot claim to know all there is to know about God. We never see God as He is. Our spiritual lens is too small. And our temptations are too great.

Told you I was going deeper, but I don't suggest you get into this explanation with your children. This is for your edification. What we want our children to know is that although God is invisible, God is not imaginary.

What you can get into with your children is something else the Bible says about the appearance of God.

In John 14:7, Jesus said, "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

That is a rather bold statement. Now he didn't mean if you take my picture, you will have a picture of God to hang on your wall. What he did mean is that if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. Look at the character and nature of Jesus. Jesus came to reveal to us the character and nature of God.

Asking what God looks like may be a child's way of asking for assurance that God is not mean looking or scary. We can answer that by directing them to Jesus. God is like Jesus. Was Jesus mean and scary looking? No, he came to help us, to save us, and to give us abundant life. He liked children. He made children an example of faith. We must become like children to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is okay if our children cannot conceptualize God as infinite being, invisible and yet real. Some of us are still working on that one, too. What we

want them to know is that God is real, and that God is like Jesus who cared for the sick, raised the dead to new life, and forgave sinners.

Still, one of the most exciting things the Bible says about God's appearance is in **I John 3:2**. This passage assures us that *"we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is."*

If you don't know God, it is not because God is imaginary. It may be because you have not allowed God to open your eyes. It may be because you are still clinging to an idol that is the most important thing in your life. If you begin today to follow Jesus, you will see God. And you will know from the inside out what so many others know, that our God is an awesome God.