

**First Baptist Church of Augusta**  
**June 7, 2009**  
**Romans 8:12-17**  
***What do we Mean by the Trinity? God***

The Trinity: we speak about the Trinity with a certain unsteadiness. The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, so goes the formula. Three in one – that is what we know. Our stained glass represents the Trinity, not only by the three panels in the top center to your left, but, if you will notice the symbol of the three entwined fish in the upper left. Two Sundays ago, we focused on Jesus, last week the Holy Spirit. Today we look at God.

Of course, can one really *look* at God? Can God even be pictured? I think so.

Even though in the Ten Commandments we are told not to have graven images of God, throughout history we have pictured God in many ways. Paintings from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance, often depict God as a grand, graying, bearded man. Michelangelo's fresco, of the Creation of Adam, on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel comes to mind: God the Creator, extending a finger to the receiving finger of Adam, to give him life. Several movies have provided a picture of God through the interpretation of certain actors. In the 1977 movie, "Oh God!", the character of God is played by George Burns, an old cigar smoking man, with a decidedly New York Jewish accent. And then, there is Morgan Freeman, who played the role of God in the movie, "Bruce Almighty." In this movie, God might be dressed as a janitor or sporting a white linen suit. Perhaps, one of the more unusual pictures I have come across of God, is not from a painting or a movie but in the novel, *The Shack*. In the book, God is imagined as an African-American woman, who cooks and serves and makes you feel at home. To my right, in our stained glass, is a pane with the image of a hand, suggesting God the creator.

Lest we think we have thoroughly profaned God, with all of these images in paintings, movies, and novels, we ought to remember that the Bible, too, has numerous images or pictures of God, through the names of God. Some scholars suggest that when the Old Testament has a name for God, it is not so much a name, as it is a description. There is the name, *El* and *Elohim*, which simply means God or Divine. From there, *El* is attached to other names like *El-Elyon*, which means, God Most High; *El-Olam*, which means, Everlasting God; and *El-Shaddai*, which means God Almighty. There are other names that are not connected with *El*. Jacob, in the book of Genesis, would refer to God as *Pahad*, which means, "Fear." In the book of Judges, God is called *Shalom*, or "Peace." Suffice it to say, there are a number of names for God, each one offering a different picture or image.

A graven image, as I understand it in the Bible, is when we say, this is the complete picture or portrayal of God. "This is God," we point and say, "and, because it is the exclusive image, your image is wrong." That is a graven image.

This morning, I hold before you two pictures of God, confessing before you, that these pictures too, are incomplete. The first picture of God to share with you comes from our Old Testament reading from the book of Isaiah: 1) High and Lofty.

This is how the prophet describes his vision of God: *I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple...* (Isaiah 6:1) God is "high and lofty." At its essence, God's picture fills the room and spills out and is beyond comprehension. The mere hem of the robe fills the cavernous temple.

The most common name of God - and some could well argue the most important name - in the Hebrew tradition, is a name we really aren't sure how to pronounce. Today, we pronounce it "Yahweh" but we don't know, because the name does not have vowels. Hebrews of old, and Orthodox and Conservative Jews today, still do not pronounce the name out of reverence. Instead, they use the word *Adonai*, which translated is "Lord."

Yahweh, a name without vowels, a name that many do not dare pronounce, a name that could mean something like “I Am who I Am.” At least, that is what God told Moses at the scene of the burning bush. “I will be who I will be, and you cannot pin me down, you cannot control me with a name, you cannot comprehend in thought or imagination. I am bigger than the steady gaze into the vast galaxy; even the hems of my robe are too large for your understanding.”

We are, by and large, afraid of a god so large, so other, so mysterious, that we make feeble attempts to diminish God, and make God not so high and lofty, but small and manageable. God gets decreased every time in our anxiety, when we attempt to explain away life’s complexities. And so, we use or reduce God to explain away everything from the Big Bang Theory, to how dinosaurs roamed the earth, oftentimes, with rather ridiculous and illogical results. Do we really want a god that small, a god that we can manage, a god that we can minimize to a mere name, a god that we can use to serve our own purposes? I think not.

Theologian, Rudolf Otto, said it best, when in framing the mystery of God with the phrase, “Wholly Other.” We see the LORD, high and lofty.

Yet, while such a picture of God cannot be framed, Paul the apostle speaks of the nearness and intimacy of God. 2) Abba! Father!

In this passage, Paul speaks that we are children of God and inheritors – heirs – of God. We belong to God and God belongs to us, and as a way to seal that relationship, Paul uses two different words that mean the same thing. In the Aramaic, it is *Abba* and in the Greek, it is *Pater*. Both are intimate terms for Father or Daddy. They are not words of gender but relationship. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus addressed God with this very same phrase: *Abba, Father*.

To call on God as a child, expresses our need and our closeness in relationship. God is not so “wholly other,” that God is not any earthly good.

Getting close to God also means, we are without excuse. Intimacy, in other words, is reciprocal. God doesn’t just want to walk along side us. God wants to abide in us.

Tony Campolo describes it as such:

*There’s more to being a Christian than just believing the right stuff, than just having the right doctrine, having your head in the right place. To be Christian, you must open yourself up and invite the spirit of God, to invite Jesus, to invite the Holy Spirit to invade you, to possess you, to take possession of you. And here’s the phrase: to lead you. Are you willing to surrender to the Spirit and allow the Spirit to flow into you, take control of you and lead you? Because if that happens, no matter what goes on around you, you’ll know that all things will work together for good in the economy of God. (Tony Campolo, 30 Good Minutes)*

In fact, in Isaiah’s vision, this vision of God, high and lofty and wholly other, there is a divine commissioning: “Who will go for us?” Two pictures of God: High and Lofty, and Abba, Father. How then are we to picture God? High and lofty, and wholly other? Or is it Abba, Father?

Maybe, we need both. This church needs both pictures too. We need to always remember that God is bigger than our words and understandings. This sanctuary cannot *contain* God. Our teachings cannot *confine* God. Our plans cannot *control* God. As long as we remember that God is “high and lofty” then the rest of life will be in perspective. Our heavenly, as well as earthly relationships, are less likely to be abused or misused.

We need to remember, too, that the high and lofty God also comes down, to continue with the imagery, and relate with us on intimate terms. Authentic relationships have mutuality. There is a sacred sharing going on, when we claim that God is our Abba.

Life's circumstances do not negate both pictures of God. In the course of life, we are inconvenienced by the uninvited.

I am often reminded of this in nature. For several years now, one of our bluebird boxes is home, not to bluebirds or any kind of bird, but baby squirrels. Who invited them? Last night, around 8:30 just as the sun settled beneath the horizon, I stepped out onto our front porch to listen to the crickets and frogs and other evening songs. Instead, I heard this mad scurrying up in the eaves of the porch. Amy and I stared intently in the direction of the noise of scuttling feet or claws or paws. Finally, a set of wings emerged in flight, and then another and another. We counted at least a dozen or so bats, making their exit from our porch for their night time feeding. Who invited them?

In the course of life, we are inconvenienced by the uninvited. One day we have bats in the attic, the next our child is sick with the flu. Sometimes the surprises are relatively trivial. But we all know there are events that can also be devastating.

Our faith is not to insulate us from "bats in the attic" or disappointments in life. Rather, we bring together our sometimes tenuous beliefs, to remind ourselves of God's steady presence. I love the beautiful words of Psalm 139:8: "*If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*" What a great affirmation of the character of God! High and Lofty; Abba, Father.

When the only answer to the uninvited and the inconvenient is silence and mystery, may it be enough. And when the spirit moves us towards an intimacy to cry, Abba, Father, may we be thankful.

As a City on *this* Hill our role is to be a sharing congregation, where we share with one another and this world, that the High and Lofty God, also, is the abiding God of Abba, Father.