

“WE ARE LIKE...”

PSALM 1; 42:1-5

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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Over the last few weeks, I've had a number of conversations with people from off the street who are in some kind of distress, whether this is personal issues or relational issues or spiritual anxiety or some combination of the above.

I often have no idea what to say or how to help these people, so I try to mostly listen.

When I do this, **what often emerges is a false or inadequate or damaging understanding of either God or self.**

This is basic to so many of our problems in life.

People are confused about

- What God is like
 - o A very severe judge in the sky waiting to squish us the first time we mess up?
 - o A doting grandfather who just wants us to be happy?)
- What we are like
 - o We think too little
 - o We think too much of ourselves

Or, very often, both of the above.

Life can be hard as it is. Walking around with damaging self-images and damaging images of God in our heads makes things quite a bit more difficult!

Last week we talked about metaphors.

We talked about the metaphors found in Scripture for God and specifically, the metaphor of God as our “rock.”

As we saw, though, there are dozens of metaphors for God found throughout the Bible, each communicating something important about who God is and how God relates to the created world and us.

This week, we’re going to look at a few of the biblical metaphors Scripture uses for *us*.

When I sat down at the beginning of the week, I expected to find only a handful of metaphors for human beings rather than the catalogue that we discovered for God last week.

And I expected them to be quite a bit less flattering (the subject matter isn’t quite as inspiring ☺).

But I was actually surprised by how many I came up with!

So, like last week, I want to start by seeing how many metaphors for human beings that we can come up with together.

What images can you think of?

1. Sheep
2. Brood of Chicks (Matthew 23:37)
3. Dream (Psalm 90:5)
4. Grass (Psalm 90:5)
5. Dust (Genesis 28:14; Psalm 103:14-15)
6. Bride (Song of Songs, Isaiah 62:5; John 3:29; Revelation 21:2)
7. Vapor/Mist (James 4:14)
8. Stubble (Isaiah 47:14)
9. Breath, passing shadow (Psalm 144:3-5)
10. Animals that perish (Psalm 49:12)
11. Treasured Possession (Deuteronomy 14:2)
12. Young lions—evildoers, eager to devour (Psalm 17:12)
13. Apple of God’s eye (Psalm 17:8)
14. Jars of Clay (2 Corinthians 4:7)
15. Branches (John 15:5)

16. Vineyard (Isaiah 5)
17. Tree (Psalm 1)
18. Deer (Psalm 42:1-5)

What do we notice about these metaphors?

- Transience (mist, vapour)
- Helplessness (sheep, brood of chicks)
- “Creatureliness” (we are of the earth, like all of God’s creatures)
- Value! (treasured possessions, bride, apple of God’s eye)

The metaphors for human beings are a bit more ambiguous than those employed for God. We are a bundle of contradictions.

We are a mixed message.

We’ve heard parts of two Psalms read this morning. Each passage gives us metaphors to understand who we are and how we are to live.

Psalm 1 compares a fruitful well-watered tree with chaff that the wind blows away.

The comparison is obvious enough. The righteous are the tree and “the wicked” or “sinners” are the chaff.

Seems simple enough. But how do we distinguish between “the righteous” and “sinners”—especially when we are always a bit of both.

Sin, throughout Scripture means to “miss the mark.” There is a target for a human life; there is a way that this is supposed to go; there is a goal that we have been created to aim for.

What is the goal? Well, in keeping with the fruit and trees metaphor, we could look to a passage like Galatians 5:22-23:

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control.

Or we could look to well-known passages like Micah 6:8:

And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

Or, better yet, the words of Jesus himself, repeating commands from Deuteronomy and Leviticus (Matthew 22:37-40):

³⁷ Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

These are the things that we are to meditate on day and night, these are the practices and habits that we are to be cultivating.

This is the target we are aiming for.

This is how we are to practice being human.

When we are walking **away** from this way of being human, we are not flourishing in the way that God intended for us to do.

We are missing the target. We are sinning.

So, the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the wicked will be destroyed.

Really? A quick glance at our world seems to offer fairly compelling evidence to the contrary!

We need to read these words alongside other passages:

- The Lord makes his rain to fall on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45)
- Repeated laments throughout Scripture (Psalms, Job, Lamentations): “Why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer?”

The theme of the righteous prospering and the wicked being blown away is an eschatological promise, not an iron clad formula for present reality.

But the fact that we are given an image from creation is worth pondering.

Trees do not arrive fully formed. Their lives are characterized by a long season of *growth*. They are always in the process of *becoming* what they will one day be: a mature tree producing fruit.

There will be storms that lash against this tree. This tree will likely groan under the summer heat and lean hard into the wind. The growth of this tree will not take place under wonderfully idyllic conditions.

There may be seasons of deliberate pruning. Branches will have to be cut back, even eliminated for the overall health of the tree.

In the same way, our lives will be characterized by trial, by struggle, by suffering. Thank God, there will also be sunny days of glorious sunshine by the river's edge as well!

This is the garden in which we grow.

Psalm 42 gives us a different metaphor—that of a deer panting after the water.

The Psalmist likens this panting with his desire for an experience of the living God. His present experience is one of absence, of lack, of longing.

“My tears have been my food day and night... “ He is mocked by those who say, “Where is your God?” He wistfully remembers when his experience of God was different, when there was joy and festivity and praise instead of tears.

The psalmist is downcast and disturbed. He is longing for a God that seems absent.

This is a metaphor for *desire*.

One metaphor that we didn't talk about earlier was perhaps the least flattering in all of Scripture.

Whore.

The biblical examples are too many to recount, but particularly in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea (this whole book is, in fact, an extended reflection on this metaphor as the prophet Hosea is commanded to marry Gomer, “promiscuous woman,” and their relationship is described as reflecting God’s relationship with Israel, the people of Israel are presented as a whore that is forever chasing after the gods of other nations, continually abandoning her one true love.

We tend to look down on Israel’s persistent “whoring.” “How stupid could they be?!” we wonder.

And yet, why would Israel abandon her God if her experience was not periodically one of absence?

Think about it: If Israel’s experience of God was always one where God’s ways were transparently clear, where doing the right things always led to lives of prosperity and blessing, then ***why would they bother chasing after other gods?***

There’s a famous line in the hymn, “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” that says, “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it”...

But there are times when we are more prone than others.

Let’s bring it closer to home. When are *we* most tempted to wander after gods that cannot save, whether these are gods of entertainment or gods of acquisition and wealth or gods of control or gods of manic obsession with health and fitness or youth or beauty?

When are we most tempted to pursue alternative visions of what life is for and how salvation is to be achieved?

Isn’t it when this whole “following Jesus” thing seems hard or boring or not very productive or useful... or when it only seems to lead to a more deep experience of pain and suffering... or when God seems painfully absent?

Just like Israel, we wander from God when it seems like our needs and desires are not being met in the way that we think they ought to be.

All idolatry is simply misplaced desire.

The desire itself is not the problem. We are desiring creatures.

Like the Psalmist, we have a hunger for life, for fulfillment, for safety, for peace, for justice, for joy... We crave these things right down into our bones.

Even when we wander after false gods, we are, in a confused way, giving expression to the very desire that is a deep, deep part of who we are and how we have been made.

So, we have these two metaphors.

We are like trees, created to flourish, to bear fruit, to reach to the sky for the one who made us.

We are like a deer, panting for water... We hunger and long for God and for the future he has promised, no matter how confusedly we express this, no matter how frequently we wander.

This is what we are like.

A few final words.

The first is to say there is more to the story than human desire for God.

Unbelievably, we are not just *subjects* who desire but the *objects* of desire. **God desires us.** I wish I had more time to talk about this crucially important truth, but that would be a whole sermon on its own.

I will simply quote the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, who puts it very well:

*The **whole story** of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body, tells us that God desires us...*

*The life of the Christian community has... the task of teaching us this; so ordering our **relations that human beings may see themselves as desired, as the occasion of joy.***

Second, all this talk about well-watered, fruitful trees and properly oriented desire could leave the impression that there is *one* vision of a what a well-lived, flourishing life should be.

A story:

At one of the previous churches we attended, a man named Brian would often attend. Brian was probably in his late 40's or early 50's. He had an impish smile, a loud voice, and a long, wispy comb-over that always threatened to fly off to one side of his head.

Brian had suffered a serious brain injury earlier in life. He was famous around town; he had been kicked out of almost every church due to his often inappropriate behaviour.

Brian would blurt out whatever happened to be going on in his mind at pretty much any point in the worship service. Rhetorical questions from the front were interpreted as invitations by Brian, and he would answer any and all of them in an attempt to get a laugh. Brian's interjections were often quite crude.

Brian would also periodically offer unsolicited hugs and other forms of physical affection, often to women. Not surprisingly, this was a bit of a problem.

Brian probably wouldn't be what most people think of as a vision of human flourishing.

I would often look at Brian during our morning worship. Especially during the singing.

Brian was very physically expressive, and would make up his own actions to every song, no matter if the song was a good candidate for actions or not! He would often be drawing elaborate word pictures with his hands, leaning toward the front of the sanctuary almost *hungrily*. He would usually have a huge smile on his face.

What I saw in Brian was *desire*.

Brian probably wouldn't have rated very highly by any of the standards that we often use to measure the value of a human life.

He didn't know much about the Bible, he didn't know much about ethics, he hadn't studied at a fancy university.

He wasn't widely admired, nor did he enjoy the esteem of "influential" people. He didn't know how to say the right thing at the right time.

He didn't make a lot of money or donate to important causes.

But he had a hunger for God—a simple, unadorned, childlike longing for the God who made him.

I am 100% convinced that God honours our desire for him, however it is expressed, however well it is understood, and however consistently we may or may not be able to live it out.

God honours our reaching... our groaning... our panting... our desiring... in all of its various shapes and sizes and different manners of expression.

God knows that our wanting is necessarily incomplete.

I want to close with a prayer that I think expresses this beautifully. This is from the Trappist monk Thomas Merton:

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

Amen.