

# Hallowed Be Thy Name

sermon digest

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Isaiah 6:1-4; 1 Peter 1:15-17; Revelation 4:8-11

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The Sunday school child was engrossed in the production of a piece of art limited only by the number of crayons in the box and the size of the paper on the table. Curious about the nature of the child's work, the teacher inquired, "Johnny, what are you drawing?" Johnny replied, "God," the standing answer to almost every Sunday school question. Recognizing a teachable moment, the teacher gently offered a correction, "but no one knows what God looks like." Without looking up, Johnny replied, "they will when I get through."

It's supposed to be a funny story, intended to make you laugh; but it is not so far removed from the idea of God in the adult world around us.

***The popular idea of God seems to be stuck at the child's level of understanding.*** In 1977, "Oh, God!" hit the theaters with a bang. At the age of eighty, George Burns played God to Jerry, John Denver's role as the modern Moses. For several weeks, the movie dominated conversations at church. After seeing the movie, my doctor said that it was the best picture of God he had ever seen, including, I suspect, the images that he had encountered in my sermons. Burns, AKA God, is an old man with a dry sense of humor, who approaches Jerry, John Denver, a grocery clerk, with a message for humanity. The story ends up in court with Denver calling God to be his witness. Rather than leave Jerry on a limb, Burns appears to the court and is sworn in, "So help me Me." Then he announces, "If it pleases the court, and even if it doesn't please the court, I'm God, your honor." After a few demonstrative miracles, Burns disappears leaving with an audible invitation for the people to "believe in me." In the epilogue, Denver complains to God that he has lost his job and everyone thinks he's a nut. Burns replies that he is in good company, "Lose a job and save the world."

I have to admit that George Burns was a lot more entertaining than my sermons and, except for the humor, not so far removed from some of the pictures of God that can be found in the Bible. I actually preferred the George Burns version of God to the Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 movie "The Ten Commandments." Some of the conversations between Moses and God, enhanced by Hollywood technology, put us back at the Sunday school table drawing our literal images of the divine. Most movie reproductions of biblical material get less than half of the picture. Biblical imagery relies on human-like ideas of God which scholars have labeled "anthropomorphism." Human words spoken in an audible voice from a burning bush or out of the clouds on Mount Sinai like God walking in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the evening are little different from cartoons when literalized by the entertainment industry.

As racial integration became part of the normal world around us, Morgan Freeman appeared as God in the 2003 movie "Bruce Almighty" and again in 2007 in "Evan Almighty." Alongside comedians Jim Carrey and Steve Carell, Morgan Freeman's God was no less of a joke than George Burns. In a 2012 interview Freeman was cornered with the question, do you believe in God? His immediate response, playing on the humor of his movies, was, "I am God." He elaborated on the Genesis message that God created humanity in the divine image. As the image of God, Freeman declared, "I am God." But in his work on the science documentary, "Through the Wormhole," he acknowledged being an agnostic, that God is a human creation. Yet Morgan Freeman's excitement and fascination with the mystery of the universe contains something of the awe and wonder in the biblical experience of God.

We are born with a concrete, material view of the world around us. The child lives at the very center of his/her universe. Much like the world of Galileo's era, the child's world is self-centered, and all reality is grasped in terms of things. Only with maturity do children grow into a larger world of abstractions that cannot be presented in material form. For example, love cannot be measured by the inch or by the pound or captured in a mathematical equation; yet who among us would deny the authenticity of our experience of love.

When asked about the existence of God, Nobel Prize winning chemist Paul Boyer commented that when there is no evidence of a thing, he as a scientist could not believe that the thing exists. It seems that we are back at the table in the preschool Sunday school trying to draw a literal picture of God as another George Burns or Morgan Freeman.

If we take the Bible as our guide, the Prophets were offended with the picture of God as a thing, made by human hands of precious metal or stone. The Old Testament objection to idolatry in the first and second Commandments calls us to a higher view of God than that with which we began as children. Although the Jews sometimes complained that God lacked the qualities of pagan gods, visible and subject to human demand, they grew to affirm the hiddenness of God. The ground of all being could not be captured in works of art or human words; and every time the Jews thought they had arrived at a complete understanding of God, they found that God is more.

***In the highest reaches of the Bible, God is holy.*** Paul Minear (*Theology Today*, April 1, 1990, p. 5ff) notes that holiness dominates the speech of the biblical prophets and apostles. The adjective *holy* appears some 250 times. The word lies at the center of the nature of God. Holiness speaks of the majesty and wonder of God. Holiness is the difference between God and creation. God is separate from the “things” we touch and consume every day. The holy God is wholly other than ourselves or the world around us.

I heard an interview of Karen Armstrong last week in which she discussed her work in the study of religion. She objected to the idea that God is a “supreme being,” suggesting that God is one of us writ large. She made the shocking statement, “God is nothing” and went on to explain that God can be identified with the root meaning of the word, “NO THING.”

Theologian Paul Tillich challenged Christians to reach beyond the Bible, beyond all previous experience of God, to the God beyond God. God is always infinitely greater than we can imagine or describe in words. The Hebrew objection to the religious practice of idolatry was exactly in line with this lofty view of God. For Jews, God was NO THING which could be fashioned from stone or wood, subject to the work of a human artisan. God was no material being of any sort. *God is holy.*

Because Isaiah’s vision in the Temple presents the God beyond our grasp, Tillich called the story in Isaiah 6 one of the greatest chapters of the Bible. Isaiah’s vision of the holy God does not translate easily into paint on canvas. Isaiah does not describe a visible God, only the angelic worship and the glory, the light, which surrounds God: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” God is not a thing, not a person among persons. Isaiah is both attracted to the glory of God and repelled by God’s righteousness. The Prophet is appalled at the contrast between his mortal sinfulness and the moral purity of God. A symbol of God’s holiness and of God’s redemptive grace, fire purges Isaiah’s unclean lips to prepare him for service.

When read in historical context, Isaiah did not experience God as the winning ticket to the international lottery. He was being called to a thankless task of proclaiming truth to power, of calling a nation to repentance in the face of a certain collapse. His was from the beginning a losing battle in the normal human measure of success. To understand Isaiah’s calling to the eternal purpose of God one needs a vision of the eternal that makes the temporal and immediate point in time almost irrelevant.

In a circumstance of similar difficulty 1 Peter addresses the “exiles” in Asia Minor with a call to live up to the God they worship: “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” It’s human nature; people tend to imitate their gods. We are not called to be gods, but to behavior that is godly, godlike. The “saints” of the New Testament are identified with God’s holiness at the character level.

Finally, John’s vision of God from his prison in Patmos is a call to worship. Rather than a description of God, the encounter with God is a call to worship: “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come. . . . You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power.”

Let’s grow up. Having been children, we can understand the child’s vision of the world and of God, but it is time that we outgrew our tendency to create gods in our own image. We need the God who transcends George Burns and Morgan Freeman and all of the human attempts to paint a portrait of God.